# Teaching and learning German as a Foreign Language at Tertiary Level: Application of Communicative Language Teaching for Nigerian Learners

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## Abstract

This article will take a look at the Communicative Language Teaching with a particular reference to the teaching and learning of German in Nigeria. It explains the way teachers can focus the teaching of German as a foreign language (**GLF**) in the classroom setting in such a way that students can communicate in a spontaneous way, taking into account their real experiences. Communicative language teaching (**CLT**) is

a language teaching method that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the goal of study. Here, the Communicative Language Teaching with a combination of some other methods is clearly explained. The article gives some examples of communicative activities that can be used in a German class for non native learners of German.

**Key words**: Communicative Language Teaching, foreign language, German language, communication, language acquisition methods, Nigerian

## Introduction

Language as a means of communication constantly evolves the gateway to another culture.   Communication is the exchange of information on social, cultural, literary and political issues. It includes interaction on various spheres of life and activities. Thus, the teaching of foreign languages is gaining more grounds, in order to improve interpersonal and international communications among people and nations. Awa is of the opinion, that some languages have distinguished themselves from other languages in the world, thus calling them living languages of the world in the sense that such languages have imposed their presence in other nations (38). Interest in German as a foreign language remains at a very high level.

The latest **Deutsch als Fremdsprache Weltweit** (German as a Foreign Language Worldwide) survey puts the number of German language students worldwide at 15.4 million according to Michael Gardner. German appears to be an increasingly important language in people's careers, both at home and among those seeking to go to Germany to study, work and live. In Nigeria, German is learnt predominantly at schools and learning takes place mainly in the university system or other

language centres. Ebert notes that "Germany is more appealing than ever as a location for business and studies". (Quoted in Micheal Gardner) We are looking at the communicative language teaching as a method of acquiring German as a modern and living language (compare Awa 2007, 38) which Feuser, in the words of Achebe quoted in his article: "30 Years of Modern Language Teaching in Nigeria" referred to as one of "any living language, which is taught in West Africa outside its country or countries of origin". We will also consider different methods of language teaching with their advantages and disadvantages before recommending the communicative language teaching as a method that will enhance the communicative proficiency of Nigerian learners at the tertiary level.

## Background

The teaching of foreign languages has witnessed a lot of dynamic changes in the methods used in the teaching and acquisition of foreign languages. It is either an extension or modification of the existing methods, in order to meet the demands of communication. According to Awa, these methods can either be didactic based or taken into consideration other factors like the specific needs of the learners and the learning situation (30). The choice of a method depends on the creativity of the teacher to understand the learning needs of the students and the environment in which the learning takes place. Awa argues further that the change in method according to language planners will depend on the need to reappraise the curriculum content, in order to improve the standard of the language learners (compare Awa 2007, 39). The effect of redefining new goals for the curriculum content for language learning ensures flexibility and introduction of new methods to make improvement in language acquisition. According to Richard and Rodger invention of new methods in foreign

language has become a part of the teaching system. The proliferation of methods is a prominent characteristic of contemporary second and foreign language teaching (vii). The need for proficiency in communication created opportunities for efficiency in the teaching of languages. With the above background, we shall briefly discuss some other methods of language teaching.

**The grammar translation method** is the very first known traditional method of language teaching. It centres on the traditional concepts of teaching grammar and vocabulary. This process includes grammatical rules, procedures for selecting vocabulary, and social conventions governing speech. In practice, reading and writing are the major focus and are also given precedence; little or no systematic attention is paid to speaking or listening. Students are forced to memorize hundreds of verb tenses and word lists, but they never really use the language spontaneously and naturally in real communication. As a result, the overall communicative competence of the students is very poor. The weakness of this method led to the need to articulate and develop alternative methods of language teaching.

An example of a class activity in a grammar translation method is illustrated below.

**Leute, Leute**                               **People, People**

| Das ist Angelika Wiechert. | That is Angelika Wiechert |
|---|---|
| Sie kommt aus Dortmund; | She is from Dortmund; |

| | |
|---|---|
| jetzt lebt sie in Hamburg. | She lives now in Hamburg. |
| Sie ist verheiratet und hat zwei Kinder | She is married and has two children. |
| Frau Wiechert ist 34 Jahre alt | Mrs Wiechert ist 34 years old |
| und Ingenieurin von Beruf | and an engineer by profession. |
| Aber zurzeit ist sie Hausfrau. | But, she is a house wife at the moment. |
| Die Kinder sind noch klein. | The children are still small. |
| Angelika Wiechert hat zwei Hobbys: | Angelika Wiechert has two hobbies: |
| Lesen und Surfen | Reading and surfing the internet |

(This text is taken from Themen Aktuell 1, Kursbuch, page 14, the English translation is done by the authors)

This is a practical example of a grammar-translation classroom activity. The teacher gives the students a brief passage in German language; the teacher will provide some new vocabulary from the passage and give the students time to translate the passage. There will be some new materials included in the passage, perhaps a new case, a new verb tense

or a more complex grammatical construction. The teacher explains the material to the students as he or she works through the passage with them.

**The direct method** also known as the natural method is a radical change from the Grammar-Translation Method by the use of the target language as a means of instruction. There is avoidance of the use of first language as a means of communication in the classroom and its use as a translation technique. The Direct method advocates the spontaneous and direct learning of a foreign language in the class rather than the procedural rule and analytical procedure of learning grammar. The learner can deduce the rule and pattern of grammar. It gives priority to speaking and pronunciation. Familiar words are used to teach new vocabularies using pictures and demonstration. This method follows the principle and observation of the natural approach in which a child naturally acquires its mother tongue. The use of the language that is spoken in the study environment is not allowed. Students are supposed to figure out rules for themselves. Students are encouraged to speak at all times, making this the ultimate in student-centred classrooms. Direct method failed to consider the practical realities which may be found in learning a foreign language in a classroom.

**The audio-lingual method** derived its pattern from linguistics and psychology, which assumes that learning a language, entails the study of grammar from the view of syntax. It is characterized by the separation of four basic skills of language learning, which are: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This method uses dialogues as the main means of presenting the language and emphasizes certain practice techniques, such as repetition, drills and memorization. Listening and speaking were now brought right into the centre of teaching in this method. Tape recordings, and laboratory drills were offered in practice. Although this method contributed immensely to

language teaching, it failed to address the issue of real communication outside the classroom. Students were often found to be unable to transfer skills acquired through Audiolingualism to real communication outside the classroom.

**The audio visual method** as the name implies is a mixture of audio and visual presentation of foreign language materials with a view of improving comprehension and retention. Language instruction is made possible by the use of audio visual aids like filmstrips, pictures microforms, slides, projected opaque materials, DVDs /CDs, PowerPoint, television educational series tape recording and flashcards. With the interconnectivity of computers making our world a global community, the use of audio-visual aids has grown exponentially with the use of life videos on the internet, android mobile phones, face book, YouTube, and other online materials. The goal of audio-visual aids is to enhance teacher's ability to present the lesson in simple and effective pattern. The language teacher uses this method to enhance teaching and learning of foreign language especially in a non-native environment. The visual materials make the students to make use of the sensory organs of seeing and hearing, thus making it easier for the learners to understand.

**Communicative Language Teaching**

The changing educational realities to the teaching of foreign languages in Europe gave impetus for a search for better methods of teaching foreign languages. The communicative language teaching began in Britain as an alternative to Situation Language Teaching in which language is taught by practicing basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities. This was in response to the sort of criticism Chomsky had leveled at structural linguistic theory in his book *Syntactic Structure*s. Chomsky had criticized the structural theories of language

which lack creativities and real communication. Applied Linguists and language Psychologists tried to seek a humanistic approach to language teaching, one in which the interactive processes of communication received priority. This led to a paradigm shift which resulted in communicative language teaching. Communicative competence is a concept introduced by Hymes (1972) and redefined by many authors. Hymes' original idea was that speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes.

The communicative language teaching aims to make communication the goal of language teaching and creates techniques for teaching the four skills of language learning. It encourages activities that involve real communication. Language learners are expected to be negotiators, teachers to be organizers. It is no doubt that the communicative language teaching gained popularity and dominated language teaching in many countries, because it makes language learning more interesting and helps learners to develop linguistic competence as well as communicative ability.

## Advocating the Communicative Language Teaching in teaching German language as a foreign language in Nigeria

The main objective of this article is to address the issue of communicative competence of Nigerian students of German. This article is proposing this method, which will help students studying German in the Nigerian universities especially those who are studying it either as the single honour or the combined honours. The goal of language learning is not only to study the rudiments of the grammar in a stereotype way, but also to be able to communicate effectively in real life situations outside

the classroom. Thus, Sonaiya in her article "grenzenlos lernen" expressed the immediate need to improve the competence of those learning German in our higher institutions. She lamented that the abolition of the year abroad is affecting the quality of the Nigerian students of German in terms of their communicative competence. She decries further that the teaching of German is lacking in the aspect of fostering language exchange with the native speakers of German (40). Sonaiya in reflecting on the sociological and philosophical contexts, in which foreign languages are taught, criticises the method in which the foreign languages are taught in our classrooms:

> We simply took whatever methods came to us from abroad, methods that were designed for learners with totally different cultural backgrounds and, possibly, educational objectives than our own and put them to use in our language classrooms.( qtd in Awa 38page)

 Sonaiya's criticisms of the borrowed methods used in our foreign language classrooms need to be addressed. What emerges clearly is lopsidedness and imbalance in teaching foreign languages in our cultural settings. There is no much result  that is achieved, because of lack of direct integration and exchange  with the target language,   which according to Sonaiya, direct unmediated contact with the target culture is considered a major aspect of the foreign language learning experience (49) .  Our foreign language teachers borrow methods, which may not suit our learning environment, the multilingual nature of the learners and the language needs of the learners; as well as the availability of modern teaching and learning facilities.

Since the abolition of the year abroad programme in Germany in 1997, Nigerian students of German are not to be said to be having unmediated contact with the mother tongue speakers, thus, there is a bridge between their learning and having active

access to interact with native speakers of German. This apparent lack of exchange and immersion has somewhat reflected in their inability to communicate effectively after their four year degree programme. From the afore- mentioned challenge of teaching German in Nigeria, it can therefore be said that, there is a great need to improve the communicative competence of Nigerian students of German through a method or with a combination of methods, which will develop the communicative abilities of the students.

A German language teacher should not limit himself only to routine use of textbooks or teaching aids but should avail himself with modern means of communications like satellite television, videos, and even the use of the Internet to bring the students closer to real communication. An understanding of foreign language acquisition methods can improve the teacher's ability to serve the culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom. It is important to get professional development, which will enable the teacher to gain a full understanding of foreign language acquisition theories and teaching strategies, which can be quickly understood and applied in the German language classroom. Communicating effectively in German language requires the learner's good understanding of linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of German language. This understanding will enable him to use the right language in the right context and then he can be referred to as communicatively competent speaker. However, the realization of this level of communicative skill is always a big challenge for Nigerian students of German language. They often struggle through their journey towards the achievement of this goal and are often met with many obstacles. Therefore, there is need to redesign German language courses and programmes for Nigerian contexts to achieve this desirable goal.

The objective of learning German language is to interact and communicate effectively in real life, which involves the use of German Language or working with German literature or aspects of German culture. Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about their real life activities.

**German Language Teaching Centred in Communication: Some examples of communicative exercises in the classroom**

In a communicative teaching method, activities in a German lectures are to be centred in helping the students acquire certain abilities in oral interaction and expression, hearing and reading comprehension. In each class, students should lead to practice German in contextualized and practical situations through activities with predefined goals. The exercises and activities that can be used in Communicative Language Teaching are numerous and inexhaustible as long as such activities will enable learners to attain a high level of communicative competence. Classroom activities should be on tasks that will involve information exchange and role play. Both the teacher and the learners have different roles to play.

**First lecture with beginners in a German course**

Two new students introduce themselves in front of the class.

**<u>Zwei neue Studenten stellen sich vor der Klasse</u>**

Chidi: Hallo, mein Name ist Chidi. Wie heißt du?

Bimbo: Ich heiße Bimbo. Ich bin neu an der Uni. Bist du auch neu und woher kommst du?

Chidi: Ich bin neu. Ich habe eine Zulassung, um Deutsch zu studieren. Ich komme aus Anambra. Und du?

Bimbo: ich bin Deutschstudentin und komme aus Lagos Staat. Wo wohnst du?

Chidi: Ich wohne im Studentenwohnheim. Und du?

Bimbo: Ich wohne auch im Studentenwohnheim. Das ist Super! Wir können Deutsch zusammen lernen und sprechen. Es freut mich, dich kennenzulernen.

Chidi: Ich auch

**Another example of communicative activity in the class**

**Beim Abendessen bei Familie Okoronkwo**

Vater: Hallo was gibt es zum Abendessen?

Mutter: Wir haben heute Abend viel zu vergnügnen.

Obinna: Mutter, Ich weiss, dein Essen ist immer super.

Adanna: Vater, ich weiss, du hast schon Hunger .

Vater: Bring das Essen jeztz. Es ist schon halb sechs.

Mutter: Alles ist bereit.

Obinna: Es gibt Abacha mit Gemuse und Fisch.

Vater: Dazu gibt es unseren lokalen frischen Palmwein.

The teacher can create a lot of class activities like Role-play, games, pair-work, learning by teaching, group activities in

contextualized, practical and everyday situations in German. The teacher should always use any activity that will engage learners in spontaneous communication. The teacher should take note of student's mistakes in order to help them discover on their own the correct way of speech.  These activities will make the learners to have a deeper appreciation of the German language, cultures, and literature. When interacting with their classmates or teacher, they will develop self confidence in using German and will have a deeper understanding of how they     can     interact     in     German     always. When the students of German participate actively in the class activities, it can develop their communication skills, which they can apply outside the classroom. Besides, these activities should give the students the opportunity to learn about the linguistic, grammatical and cultural aspects of the communicative competence of German language.

**Challenges for achieving the Communicative Competence for Nigerian students of German language**

Teachers of Foreign Languages still find it difficult in making their students achieve a high level of communicative competence despite the popularity of the method (Sano et al, 1984).  This is due to the challenges that have been encountered by both foreign language teachers and students in these contexts, since the introduction of this concept. The language teachers in these contexts will face difficulty in choosing what skills are to be taught for students and in identifying the effective methods for developing students' communicative competence (Huda, 1999, 30).

For a Nigerian Teacher of German, it is often an uphill task for him to make his students   to achieve a high level of communicative competence.  Here, two major challenges will be looked into:  Proficiency of the teacher and lack of real

immersion programme for learners. Proficiency of the teacher is a major factor in the development of the communicative competence of German language learners. However, this goal seems to be very-far reaching in foreign contexts, if this concept is to be interpreted in terms of native speaker's level. Nevertheless, all language teachers need to seek the development of their communicative competence, if the goals of teaching a language is to be able to help the learners achieve a high communicate competence. They should be aware that the realization of this far-reaching goal requires much effort and may take a long time. The teaching of foreign language requires high proficiency language level in order to teach effectively. Teachers' low proficiency level can be a hindrance in using the communication methods for language teaching. (Li, 1998; Nunan, 2003; Orafi & Borg, 2009).

The other challenge is that there is no real immersion programme for Nigerian students of German language. Language exchange and immersion help learners of a foreign language to have a direct contact with the native speakers of the language they are learning. This exchange will create an unforgettable experience that will accelerate their language learning process. There is no real immersion program for Nigerian students of German. The Equivalent Year Abroad Program (EYAP) in Goethe Institute, Lagos, which was introduced in 1997 as an alternative to the year abroad programme in Germany cannot be said to improve the needed communicative competence. Spending some time in an immersion environment helps language learners to learn a target language naturally. One is not trying to dismiss the effectiveness of language education in the classroom. With the experience of the courses taught in the classroom, it would be amazing to see the progress of interacting socially in Germany, if the opportunity is offered to Nigerian students of German.

## Conclusion

In foreign language teaching, it would be better to develop a model of communicative competence that takes into account the specific contextual, social and linguistic factors of non-native learners. Therefore, non-native teachers of German language need to be involved in the process of designing the language materials in German courses within the context of the learning environment. Communicative Language Teaching should be considered as a method that will enhance the communicative ability of the learners, especially in an environment where the learners cannot get direct contact with native speakers. It is a method that will help teachers, who want to provide opportunities in the classroom for their students to engage in real-life communication in the target language.

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