CHOICE OF VOICE IN CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The roles played by correct choice of voice by teachers while delivering classroom instructions cannot be overemphasized. This perhaps, is hinged on the fact that a larger proportion of instructions as well as classroom interactions are often carried out through relaying and receiving of various goal/task-oriented instructions from teachers. To that end, this paper is set out to explore available options, to an average classroom teacher, in the course of classroom interaction cum the impact of such choice on the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Nigeria. Voice, as a crucial element of communication, significantly influences students' comprehension, engagement, and learning outcomes. Focusing on the two grammatical types of voice, the paper delves into the multifaceted dimensions of voice choice as well as its underlying significance in fostering effective language learning experiences among ESL students in Nigeria. It further discusses the implications of voice choice for ESL pedagogy in Nigeria and offers recommendations for effective integration in classroom practices. In the dynamic landscape of ESL instruction, the role of voice in classroom communication cannot be overstated.

Keywords: Voice choice, classroom instructions, English as a Second Language, ESL pedagogy, communication, Nigeria

Introduction

Voice is a fundamental element of communication that encompasses both verbal and non-verbal components. Verbal aspects include speech, tone, and pitch, while non-verbal elements such as intonation, rhythm, and stress significantly influence meaning and emotional impact. In educational settings, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, voice plays a dual role: as a medium of instruction and as an embodiment of the teacher's perspective, method, or approach to teaching. In ESL instruction, where the goal is not just language acquisition but also the cultivation of cultural competence and critical thinking, the teacher's voice becomes an indispensable tool for fostering understanding and engagement. Voice here refers not only to the teacher's spoken words but also to the strategies and modalities they employ in classroom interaction. Understanding the available voice options and their implications for classroom practices is crucial for developing effective pedagogical strategies that meet learners' diverse needs.

In the context of ESL classrooms, there exist many available voice options which are commonly employed. However, this paper explores the grammatical type which can be classified into the

teacher-directed voice, student-centered voice. Each of these approaches carries distinct strengths and weaknesses that shape their effectiveness in different instructional scenarios considering the fact that English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in Nigeria is a vital component of the educational landscape, given the country's linguistic diversity characterized by diverse student backgrounds, varying language proficiencies, and unique cultural contexts (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2014). In such settings, the choice of voice in classroom instructions takes on added significance, as it must navigate linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivities, and pedagogical objectives and the global importance of English proficiency (Ur, 1996). In this context, the role of voice in classroom instructions becomes particularly significant, as it serves as a conduit for effective communication and language learning (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1996). The manner in which instructors deliver instructions through their voice can profoundly impact students' understanding, engagement, and language acquisition journey (Rivers, 2011).

Exploring Concepts and Issues Involved

Voice as a Concept in Language Teaching

Voice as concept in language teaching transcends the frequency and quality of what is heard when a teacher gives or directs an instruction in the classroom. It is typically a choice of who or what comes first when producing an English expression. This concerns, primarily, the grammatical (Active and Passive) voice, which for the purpose of this paper has been identified as the "Teacher-Directed and Student-Directed" Voices, respectively. The notion of voice within the realm of language pedagogy encapsulates the dynamic involvement and articulation of learners' individualities, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds throughout their language learning journey (Norton, 2013). It focuses significantly on affording learners ample of opportunities to actively engage with and express themselves in the target language, thus nurturing a sense of authenticity, creativity, and autonomy in their language acquisition endeavors (Kramsch, 2009). This pedagogical paradigm acknowledges that language acquisition extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency, extending into the realm of personal identity construction within the linguistic community (Norton, 2000).

Integration of the concept of voice into language instruction entails fostering a classroom ethos that values and embraces learners' diverse linguistic repertoires, cultural experiences, and sociocultural backgrounds (Norton, 2013). Educators can achieve this by implementing learner-centered activities, such as collaborative discussions, role-plays, and project-based assignments, which empower learners to express themselves authentically in the target language (Kramsch, 2009). Furthermore, the incorporation of authentic materials, including literature, films, and music from varied cultural contexts, serves to further empower learners to find and assert their voices within the language learning process (Norton, 2013).

By giving considerable attention to the concept of as well as the choice of voice in language instruction,

educators not only foster the development of linguistic competence but also nurture learners' communicative self-assurance and intercultural awareness (Kramsch, 2009). This pedagogical approach aligns with contemporary theories of language learning, which emphasize the pivotal roles of social interaction, meaning negotiation, and identity formation in the language acquisition process (Norton, 2013).

Challenges in the Choice of Appropriate Voice

One of the primary impediments to the appropriate choice of voice in language teaching lies in the lack of exposure to authentic contexts where students can practice using different voices (e.g., active vs. passive voice) (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Research has shown that language learners benefit greatly from immersion in real-world situations where they encounter diverse linguistic structures and have opportunities to apply their knowledge (Krashen, 1982). In a situation where teachers restrict themselves to a particular voice type, resulting from lack of in-depth knowledge of the other available options

Furthermore, teachers may struggle with explaining the inherent intricacies surrounding and appropriate usage of each voice when questions are put forward by their students (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). This challenge can stem from a number of factors, including inadequate teacher training, limited instructional resources, and the complexity of conveying abstract linguistic concepts to learners (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Addressing this impediment requires a multifaceted approach that integrates authentic language use into the curriculum, provides comprehensive teacher training on voice usage, and offers ample opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on their language production (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The Importance of Appropriate Voice Choice in ESL Classroom Instructions

- Comprehension and Clarity

The choice of grammatical voice—active or passive—by teachers in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' linguistic abilities. This decision is not arbitrary; it depends on teaching objectives, student proficiency, and the broader context of language use. In Nigeria, where English functions as a second language and a medium of instruction, the choice between active and passive voice impacts how students grasp sentence structure, meaning, and communication style.

Voice choice made by teachers directly influence students' comprehension of English language lessons (Brown, 2007). Choice of the appropriate voice at every stage of instruction can go a long way in enhancing understanding and reducing ambiguity in instructions. Thus, teachers of English as a second language should be conscious of this fact in the course of teaching, bearing in mind the implication such could have on the learners who consider them as an ideal model.

- Engagement and Motivation

The tone, enthusiasm, and expressiveness of the teacher's voice can enhance student engagement and motivation, particularly within the Nigerian cultural context (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2014). When a classroom teacher is able to adopt a dynamic and engaging voice, this captivates learners' attention, fostering active participation and interest in the lesson.

- Cultural Sensitivity

In multicultural ESL classrooms in Nigeria, the choice of voice should consider cultural norms and preferences regarding communication styles (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1996). A culturally sensitive approach to voice choice promotes inclusivity and respect for diverse linguistic backgrounds within the Nigerian context. Doing this has a way of getting the students ready and actively involved in the teaching-learning activities.

Types of Voice in ESL Classroom Instructions

i. Teacher-Directed Voice (Active Voice)

This first type of voice often depicts the traditional assumption that the teacher is the only all-knowing personality in the classrooms while the learners are only there to receive from them, dogmatically, whatever instruction of message is released from them. As this voice is often authoritative in nature, it can be likened to the English Active Voice, where classroom instructions are issued in the direct voice with the first person personal pronoun "I" being constantly employed to represent or by the teacher while the students take the second position "you"; thereby putting the teacher first in every one of such classroom instructions.

In traditional classroom settings in Nigeria, instructors typically employ a teacher-directed voice (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This voice type facilitates structured instruction and maintains classroom discipline, but may lack interactivity and student empowerment. It assists the classroom teacher in focusing on the traditional Subject Verb Object (SVO) order of the English sentence. For instance, a teacher would usually say "I will teach you part of speech" rather than "You will be taught parts of by me".

ii. Student-Centered Voice (Passive Voice)

Student-centered instructional approaches emphasize active participation, collaboration, and learner autonomy, aligning with Nigerian educational goals (Brown, 2007). Instructors adopting a student-centered voice promote interactive dialogue, encourage peer interaction, and empower students to express themselves confidently in English. Through this, the teacher will not only whet the learner's appetite to learn but also opens them to opportunity to learn from the experiences of other learners from different backgrounds. Passive voice is often introduced after students have mastered the basics of sentence construction in active voice. Teachers choose passive voice to meet the demands of academic, formal, or technical language. It is mainly used to highlight the Action or Object as the passive voice shifts focus from the doer

of the action to the action itself or the receiver of the action.

Example: "The examination was postponed."

(The agent postponing the exam is not relevant.)

Implications for English as a Second Language Pedagogy in Nigeria

The choice of grammatical voice, whether active or passive, is a significant decision in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, as it impacts the way students perceive and use language. This choice is influenced by several factors, including the teaching objectives, the proficiency level of the students, and the context in which the language will be used. In Nigeria, where English serves as a second language and as the medium of instruction, the decision to use active or passive voice can have far-reaching implications for students' understanding of sentence construction, their ability to communicate effectively, and their preparation for academic and professional demands.

Active voice is often the preferred choice for teaching beginners and intermediate learners due to its simplicity and clarity. The structure of active voice, which follows a straightforward subject-verb-object pattern, is easier for students to comprehend. For instance, sentences like "The boy kicks the ball" allow students to clearly identify the subject performing the action, the verb describing the action, and the object receiving the action. This simplicity makes active voice an ideal starting point for teaching the foundational aspects of grammar, enabling learners to build confidence in constructing sentences. In addition, the use of active voice aligns closely with natural speech patterns, making it highly relevant for fostering communicative competence. For example, in everyday interactions, students can easily apply active voice to describe their actions, such as saying, "I finished my homework" or "We played football after school." Teachers often choose active voice in classroom activities where interaction and clarity are priorities, as it encourages students to express themselves naturally and participate actively in discussions.

On the other hand, passive voice is chosen strategically when the focus of instruction shifts towards academic, formal, or technical language. Unlike active voice, passive voice emphasizes the action or the recipient of the action rather than the doer. For example, a teacher may introduce the sentence "The assignment was completed on time" to show how the passive voice highlights the task rather than the person who performed it. This is particularly useful in preparing students for formal writing tasks such as essays, reports, and research papers, where objectivity and formality are essential. Passive voice also allows for the omission of the agent when it is irrelevant or unknown, as in the sentence "The road was repaired yesterday." Such constructions are common in academic and professional contexts, making the mastery of passive voice a critical component of advanced language learning.

Teachers' choice of voice also depends on the proficiency levels of their students. For beginners

and intermediate learners, active voice is generally more appropriate, as it provides a clear and direct way to learn sentence construction without the added complexity of auxiliary verbs and past participles required by passive voice. For instance, transforming the active sentence "She opens the door" into its passive counterpart "The door is opened by her" requires an understanding of auxiliary verbs and past participles, which may be challenging for less proficient learners. As students advance in their studies, however, the inclusion of passive voice becomes essential to expand their grammatical competence and prepare them for the demands of academic and professional writing.

The choice of voice is also influenced by the context in which the language is used. In everyday communication, active voice is more suitable for describing actions and events in a straightforward manner. For instance, a teacher might use sentences like "The students cleaned the classroom" to teach practical communication skills. In contrast, passive voice is more appropriate in formal or academic settings where the action or its result is more important than the doer. For example, in an official report, a teacher might introduce a sentence such as "The project was approved by the committee" to show how passive voice is used to convey information objectively and formally.

In Nigeria, cultural relevance plays an important role in the choice of voice. Teachers often select examples that resonate with students' everyday experiences to make lessons more engaging and relatable. For instance, in teaching active voice, a teacher might use a sentence like "The hunter caught an antelope," while for passive voice, the same example could be transformed into "An antelope was caught by the hunter." Such culturally grounded examples help students understand the grammatical structures in contexts they are familiar with, enhancing their learning experience.

Conclusion

The choice of voice in classroom communication is not merely a pedagogical preference; it has profound implications for students' learning experiences and outcomes. Teacher-directed voices offer clarity and structure that are essential for beginners but risk limiting creativity and active engagement. Student-centered voices foster interaction and learner autonomy but require skilled facilitation to be effective.

The choice between active and passive voice in ELT classrooms should be made deliberate pedagogical decision that noting that such influences students' grammatical understanding and communicative competence. Similarly, it is equally important to note while active voice may be considered ideal for teaching foundational grammar and fostering natural communication, the passive voice prepares students for advanced writing and formal contexts. In Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural setting, teachers must balance both voices, using culturally relevant examples and aligning their choice with students' proficiency levels and learning objectives. By strategically integrating active and passive voice,

teachers can equip students with the skills needed for diverse linguistic demands.

Recommendations for Effective Voice Integration in Nigerian ESL Classrooms

- Professional Development: ESL instructors in Nigeria should receive training and support in voice modulation, effective communication strategies, and cultural sensitivity to enhance their teaching practices within the Nigerian educational system (Edge & Wharton, 1998).
- Feedback and Reflection: Regular feedback and self-reflection on voice performance and classroom interactions can help ESL teachers in Nigeria identify areas for improvement, refine their teaching approaches, and enhance student engagement and learning outcomes within the Nigerian ESL classroom context (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).
- Teachers should bear in mind that the ability effectively switch between these two voice types and help their learners understand differences in structure would go a long way in impacting their classroom performance.

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