

# CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH STUDIES IN JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the problems of teaching English studies at the Junior Secondary School level, because of the negligence of the teaching of literature in English by the teachers teaching English studies at this level of education. From personal observation, teachers give prominence to the teaching of English, since it is incorporated as part of English studies. The problem militating against the teaching of literature in English ranges from no specific periods on the class time table for literature in English, whereas English periods fill the class time table from Mondays to Fridays. Since students do not study literature where they can read English language extensively and learn to communicate effectively, they are incapable of passing external examinations in both English language and literature in English in WASCE and NECO examinations yearly. The paper points out these anomalies and proffer solutions to this general malaise in our educational system.

English Language is a major core subject of study in the Nigerian education system from primary, secondary schools to tertiary institutions. Because of the importance attached to English Language as the basic language of formal education in Nigeria, official language of government and private administrations, communication, business transactions and that of written textbooks in all subjects taught in primary, secondary schools and tertiary institutions, the teaching and learning of the language is given prominence in terms of period allocation daily.

Emphasis is placed on both oral and written media as a way of encouraging the learners to internalize the rules in order to be competent in general communication. National Policy on education in Nigeria (2004 P.13) stipulates that primary education is to inculcate permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively in English, while the policy on secondary education states that secondary education shall prepare the individuals for useful living within the society and higher education as well as inspire the students for self improvement and achievement of excellence. It also provides the opportunity to raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour and foster national unity with emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity (2005, p.16).

The objectives of National Policy on Education in Nigeria give prominence to English language as the basic language that all objectives of the various levels of education can be achieved. This accounts for why a credit pass in English language is made compulsory at the school certificate level for those aspiring to gain admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It has recently been discovered that the teaching of English language in primary and junior secondary schools is deficient in terms of methodologies applied during the lessons by the teachers, as a result many pupils and students perform woefully in public examinations and general communication. In order to check the trend especially at the junior secondary school level where the subject has changed over the years, because of the abolition of five years straight secondary education and the introduction of six-three-three four system of education, literature has not been given effective teaching and proper attention it deserves, by teachers teaching English studies.

## **Challenges of Teaching English Studies in Junior Secondary School Level**

At the junior Secondary School level, the subject is known as English studies, which is a combination of English and literature. Previously, in the 1960s and early 1980s, English Language

was taught from class one to class five as a separate subject from literature. During this period too, literature from class one to class five was taught as a separate subject with specific periods allocated to it in the time table which resulted in elaborate and effective teaching and learning of both English Language and literature in English by the students. The students were able to read and communicate fluently in English because of the knowledge and skills acquired through reading of literature.

In support of the teaching of literature as a separate subject in junior secondary level Okolie (2007, p.143) states that literature has contributed immensely and most profitably to the education and development in Nigeria, through the expressions of African's world and lives in the writings of various nationals in Africa. It also helps the Africans to unfold themselves, analyse their dreams and aspirations, implement, their visions and project their image and personality. Therefore to teach literature as a separate subject from English will enhance the expression of African cultural values, focus and visions which the students must inculcate at an early stage in their educational programme so as to appreciate the society that they live.

With the integration of English Language with literature as one subject and tagged English studies at the junior secondary level, it does not provide the teachers with proper opportunities to teach literature exhaustively, as most teachers are interested in teaching English language, using all the available periods for English studies. What can be deduced from this aspect is that literature and English Language are two broad subject areas as such both cannot be combined for effective performance if the lessons are to benefit the students. Undoubtedly, lack of serious study of literature affects students' communicative competence because they have not been exposed to varieties of styles in language usages, vocabularies and expressions which is only possible through the study of literature as a separate subject from English Language.

Okolie further postulates that reading of African novels gives one opportunity to slip imaginatively into circumstances and conditions of life beyond one's immediate milieu. Writing or reading a novel implies widening of the imaginative capacity of the reader, the writer and the audience. Literature also increases the mobility of the individual's mind by widening his experience and imaginative capacity to enter into new situations (p. 150). According to Jenkwe (2007, p. 165) literature is a fictive exploration of human experience both as educative and morally edifying field of knowledge. This assertion qualifies literature as a major field of study that should be given province in the junior secondary school.

Another major challenge facing the teaching of English studies at the junior secondary school level is lack of a single standard text book that comprises both literature and English as what we have in integrated science which is a combination of physics, chemistry and biology. This lack of texts in English studies hinders the teaching of literature while promoting the teaching of English language because only English language text books are available. Teachers prefer the teaching of English language while neglecting the literature aspect to the detriment of the students. The teachers also concentrate in the teaching of grammatical rules without encouraging the students to read prose and drama literature texts for the mastering of communicative competence from stories and actions in literature books. Grammar is defined by Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (1981, p. 28) as the study of the forms, rules and usage of words in a sentence. Therefore teaching English Language alone cannot take the place of literature aspect in the junior secondary level, since literature entails cultures and traditions of human societies and their relationships with people and other natural things in their societies.

### **Language and Literature for National Development**

The essence of teaching language and literature is for communication. William (1990, p. 55) observed that language occurs in socio-cultural and inter-personal context. This places language in broad perspective since the socio-cultural context entails human behaviour in all ramifications which include economic, politics, education and communication. For these purposes, literature is the only subject where all these human activities are distributed, narrated and discussed exhaustively, because it is in literature that the totality of cultures in different societies are reflected. On the other hand,

William identifies communicative method of language teaching as against rule governed method which does not promote the reading of literature. Communicative method promotes literature teaching where students are exposed into communicative competence, since literature exposes the students to direct application and usage of both the rules of the language and competence in the language.

Communicative method further gives the students the privilege of studying the intricate, complex and varieties of language usage. With the understanding of the language usage, the students will use literature to enhance natural needs, development and progress academically. Without proper understanding of the cultural values of the nation the student will not know the essence of national identity and prospects. It is well known that when students learn from the perspective of cultural issues, they tend to appreciate the lessons and attach emotional importance to the learning processes, since the mission of their educational values are already known.

In essence, the only approach that can help students to embrace formal lessons in Nigeria education system is the communication method which can promote students participation during lesson. When students can communicate in English Language as derived from reading prose and engaging in dialogue during drama lessons, they will be motivated to ask questions during lessons and also answer questions boldly from their teachers. In this way, the class becomes active and demonstrative for both the teachers and students. Competence in literary expressions will eventually help students to study other subjects like physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, economics, geography and many others, because literature has already liberated their language inhibitions, while generating self confidence in the students on effective communication.

### **Relevance of Literature to Language and Educational Advancement**

As a way of showing the relevance of literature to education and national development, Azikiwe (1998, p. 202) stated that literature is language since it deals with all aspects of human lifestyle and cultures. Moreover, it further shows that literature has a wider scope that overshadows all other subjects since it deals with language and communication.

In another perspective on the essence of teaching and learning of literature, McGregor (1971, p.12) observed that literature refers to Language used skillfully about subjects which are important to human beings and expresses hopes, fears, doubts, joy, love, problems and conflicts that human beings experience in their daily lives and activities, written to teach the readers lessons about life. Azikiwe again observes that literature is Language in action because it exploits the resources of time, people and place, in their oral and written forms. Reading a literature text is reading about peoples' activities, problems and prospects which directly affect the psyche of the reader, so that he is emotionally transformed into a new individual, capable of initiating good lifestyle copied from the literary characters.

From the concept of the relationship between language and Literature Eagleson and Kranmer (1976, p.102) opined that since language is the medium of literature, it helps the readers to understand the nature of language as applied to literature by giving the connotations and semantics in context usage. Grammatical structures and lexical items are drawn from the inventory of language and applied in literature expressions, which make meaningful descriptions and narrations interesting and comprehensible in literary writings. To teach English language without literature at the junior secondary school level deprives the students of the basic communicative approach, which states that language is better acquired and used effectively since it is in literature stories, poetry recitation, and drama acting or reading that communication can be enhanced, than studying the rules of language in isolated sentences structures, which do not link to real practical situations in their cultural lives.

The actual reason why students fail in public examinations like NECO and WASCE in English and literature is the fact that the teaching of literature in English has been neglected and ignored by teachers at the Secondary School Level. In most cases they complain of lack of text books for the teachers and students' unwillingness to buy prescribed texts for themselves. As a result literature which should complement English Language teaching is not taught effectively. Brumfit (1978, p.87) observed that the recent approaches to language teaching have ignored literature teaching. Moreover, literature approaches are now subsumed under approaches to language learning,

so these have negative effects on literature and language teaching and learning. Merging these two important subjects together therefore confuses the teachers of both subjects as top the appropriate methodologies that can be used to encourage students to understand the subject when passing from Junior Secondary Schools to Senior Secondary School Level.

Literature should be taught as a separate and single subject at all levels of education. Brumfit (1985, p. 112) stated that literature is the most autonomous and individualized ability in language work. A rich and widely appealing source of material for reading and the content of a foreign language is partly based on it. In Nigeria, the foreign language widely used in formal education is English Language, therefore effective teaching of literature in English can simply influence students understanding of English Language and literature better than merging both. Also, adequate periods will be provided in the time table to accommodate both subjects as it used to be done in the 1960s to 1980s. This will enable the teachers to teach these two subjects equally and properly than what it is done now. The innovations brought into the teaching of English Studies does not give attention to literature, rather it extinguishes literature.

Poor teaching of literature or lack of it in Junior Secondary School accounts for the poor passes or failures at the Senior Secondary School Certificate examination over the years. Culler (1975, p. 14) lamented that any one wholly unacquainted with literature and unfamiliar with convention by which fictions are read, would be quite baffled if presented with a poem. Azikiwe (1998, p.208) held that, knowledge of the language would enable the students to understand phrases and sentences, but he would not know quite literarily what to make of this strange concatenation of phrases. Moreover, he would be unable to read it as literature because he lacks the complex literary competence. Such a person would not be able to internalize the grammar or literature which will permit him to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meaning.

To further portray and expose the negligence of literature teaching in Secondary Schools, McGregor (1971, p.110) laments that the teaching of literature in our schools is badly neglected because of a vicious circle of educational experience, which could only be broken by well-trained and well-informed teachers of English. On the other hand, most teachers of English language are not adequately prepared to teach literature as a subject distinct from language. Students have not been taught extensive reading which can be done through literature books. So they lack reading comprehension and summary skills to tackle examinations when confronted with literary questions.

In essence, the study of literature especially at the Junior Secondary level is important towards the learning of English language and subsequent improvement in communication, acquisition of more vocabularies, oral English performance and addition of stylistic variations while speaking and writing.

### **Innovations in the Teaching of English Studies**

The combination of English and literature as English studies does not provide adequate method for the teaching of the subject as one. In order to convincingly teach the students to help them understand these two broad subjects, emphases should be given to equal time and periods allocations separately in the time table from JSS 1 to JSS 3. Moreover, students should be taught to read wide and read more from other literary works not prescribed by the class syllabus, in order to expose their scope on varieties of issues, topics and cultures. As observed by Brumfit (1985, p. 110) who rejects the concept of prescribed texts to student as restrictive, he is in support of wider reading approach because wider reading leads to a mature approach to the students' subsequent reading.

Although this wider reading approach does not reject or condemn prescribed text books, it only encourages students to read beyond that, so that they may broaden their scope on a wide range of themes, subject matters, style and diction of other literary writings, for the purpose of effective teaching and learning of literature in English. Azikiwe (1998. P. 213) suggests thirteen steps approach to the teaching of literature as follows;

- (i) Assign paragraphs or passages from the literary text to be read during the lesson. This should have been given as home work or assignment before the actual class period to the students,

- (ii) If reading is to be done in the lower class the teacher should give the students opportunity to read also.
- (iii) New vocabulary and poorly pronounced words should be written on the board for proper pronunciation, spellings, denotative and connotative meanings taught as well.
- (iv) Students should be involved in discussions, analysis and description of the reading, while the teacher gives the proper perspective of the author's vision and focus in the work.
- (v) Both the teachers and the students should ask and answer questions to elicit further explanations of the subject matter, themes, style, mood, and characters in the literary writing.
- (vi) The students in the class should be divided in groups of four or five and assigned specific chapter, passages, events and incidents, so they may be involved actively during the class lesson and after. This concept will enable them to be interested in the subject and the lesson.
- (vii) The teacher should arouse and sustain in interest of the students by relating the lessons to the real life situations, cultures and the environment of the students to show that literature is all about human lives in their environment.
- (viii) Students should be guided to extract meanings explicit and implicit from the materials read, through the use of the outline from the textual contents and situations.
- (ix) Teachers should give the students guide on how to identify the elements of literature such as plot, theme, background, subject matter, characterization, style, diction, figures of speech and the mood in the literary works at different class lessons.
- (x) In order to make the lessons interesting, the teachers should make use of instructional materials, visual aids, aural aids and charts.
- (xi) Give the students content and essay type question as class work and assignment, so as to enable them to read the text effectively for the purposes of understanding the texts and examination.
- (xii) Students should be taught how to be selective by directing them to simple things that they can write such as short stories, plays and poetry.
- (xiii) Teachers should encourage students to do intensive and extensive reading privately at home using prescribed and unprescribed text.

The advantage of intensive reading according to Oyetuyi (1971, p. 108) gets students invited in the independent study, use of words in English Language from the contexts of the authors and the denotation meanings thereby enhancing new vocabularies and free expressions.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the relationship between English Language and literature in English, it is pertinent to say that they are interwoven and inseparable. In spite of these, English studies should be taught in a way that both language and literature are given prominence. For the purpose of clarity from the perspective of the definitions of both subjects, language according to Crystal (1991, p.424) is a systematic conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in human society for communication and self expression.

Literature on the other hand as stated by Moody (1968, p. 12) is an art which springs from our inborn love of telling stories arranging words in pleasing patterns, and expressing in words some special cultural aspects of human experiences. Louise Rosenblatt (1970, p. 123) states that literature is a form of art having aesthetic values, which can be enjoyed in itself and at the same time has social origin and social effects. From these definitions, it can be observed that literature is in a class of its own, as such must be taught separately from English if the effects of the subject must be felt by the students or learners.

English Language is ruled governed so efforts should be geared towards understanding of the rule through lexical and grammatical studies, while literature should be taught as a subject that enhances public speaking and oration, stylistic communication and general appreciation of its beauty through the contextual usages in sentences, passages and texts while showing the varieties as well. Therefore, in order, to understand literature and appreciate it as a subject that gives meaning to human life and nature, it should not be subsumed under English Language as it is done in the subject called English studies.

The basic reason is that teachers of English studies give prominence to the teaching of English language to the detriment of literature in English.

### **Recommendations**

1. The educational planners, curriculums developers and educational administrators should revisit the aspect of English studies at the junior secondary school level and separate the two broad subjects, so that English language and literature in English are taught as separate subjects as it used to be in the 1960s up to 1980s. The actual reason is that English studies does not provide room for effective teaching of literature texts by both the students and teachers.
2. Another issue is lack of a single text book that can take care of English studies. Parents and students do not like to buy literature in English textbooks, because after the purchase of English language text books, they believe, that they are through with anything English. In order to force the students to study literature in English, it must be made a separate subject, so as to enable them to attach importance to it.
3. Moreover, the teachers should be informed during seminars and workshops to attach importance to the teaching of literature in English as a way of exposing the students to the material and non-material cultural values in their society, states, Nigeria and Africa to start with.
4. In a very special way, teaching of literature in English as a distinct subject will definitely enhance students' performance in English language in NECO and WASCE examinations. Apart from this, it will also help the students to speak fluently and communicate effectively, both in oral and written forms.
5. Generally the knowledge acquired through the study of literature will transform the students while making them to develop psychologically and philosophically through learning from the events, incidents and characters in the literary works read.
6. Finally the opinion of William (1990, p. 5-6) sums up the advantage of studying literature as a major subject when he reiterated that the learners mastery of sound system can be enhanced through practice with stress and rhythm in poetry, and with dialogue in drama, his use of vocabulary, idioms and syntactic structures can be improved through exposure to the best models of contemporary prose.

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*Challenges and Innovations in the Teaching of English Studies in Junior Secondary Schools in Nigeria Educational System*

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