

# CURRENT ISSUES IN THE TEACHING OF LITERARY ARTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## **Abstract**

*This paper entitled current issues in the teaching of Literary Arts in secondary Schools is to view literature as a body of knowledge which could be explored to sharpen learners' intellect and their intellectual horizon towards communication. It looks at literature as emanating from the society and which reflects the cultures and traditions of our societies which can enhance the learning of English Language. This paper postulates various methods and approaches which literature can be taught in secondary schools as a subject that can improve communicative competence of students. Furthermore, the basic problems militating against students' performance in literature at WASCE, SSCE, NECO examinations are highlighted. The role of teachers and their teaching methods as postulated can encourage the students' learning of the subject if properly managed. Again, the educational planners and governments at State and national levels share the blame for the overcrowded nature of literature syllabuses thereby scaring students from offering the subject. The role of literature as a means of effective communication and mastery of oral English cannot be over-emphasized as shown in this paper.*

## **Current Issues in the Teaching of Literature in Secondary Schools**

Literature is one of the subjects that is taught in both Junior Secondary Schools under English studies as a subject while it is taught as a separate subject in senior secondary schools in Nigerian education system. The essence of teaching literature is multi-dimensional. In the first instance, literature is meant to enhance the learning of English language because it helps the pupils and students to practice effective communication through the reading of various multiple sentences in story, drama and poetry. Secondly, it teaches the learners how to master the structural patterns of proper English language usage from the literary books read. Thirdly, to encourage the students to learn how to speak fluently especially in poetry recitation and dramatic performance.

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Therefore, the current trend for the teaching of English language at the senior secondary school level as well as the teaching of English studies at the Junior Secondary School level is to incorporate the teaching of literature in English into the teaching of grammatical structures, comprehension and summary in English language class. Williams (1990) stated 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 (5-7).

This shows that the use of eclectic approach is required in the study of literature so that the practical demonstration along with physical performance in action and speech acts can enhance students mastery of the subject of literature appropriately.

### **Purpose of Teaching Literature in Secondary Schools**

Literature is defined by Moody (1970) and quoted by Ekah (2007) as an art which springs from our inborn love of telling stories and arranging words in pleasant patterns, while expressing some special aspects of our human experiences. The concept of literature as postulated by Moody is that of expressing the aesthetic values and social functions of literature, which is a very important aspect in the formal education system, as well as that of oral communication pattern in the society that we live. As it is, literature teaching and learning by both the teachers and the students will effectively enhance the students' performance in literature and English language examinations in both NECO and WASCE.

Resenblatt quoted in Ekah (2005) further postulated that literature is a form of art having aesthetic values which can be enjoyed in itself and at the same time has a social origin and social effects in the society. The beauty of literature can be observed on close examination of form and contents of the various literary genres such as prose, drama and poetry. Prose literature derives its beauty from the plot, narrative technique, story content and the arrangement of words in sentence structures. This is enhanced by the voices that interact as characters in the events and incidents in the novels. Drama literature is also beautiful because the voices as actors engage one another in direct conversation, thereby displaying their language usage to expose their competence in oral mastery of English language. Poetry literature exposes its beauty in terms of how it is written in lines and stanzas in a compressed diction, showing the rhyme and rhythm in it when recited.

To the teachers, the purpose of the teaching of literature as a subject in primary and secondary levels is to encourage the pupils and students to improve on their speaking skills, so as to communicate effectively. In order to enable the students to study literature, care should be taken by the teachers to introduce literature text books that have relevance to the culture, values, traditions, education, economics, political and social situations of the society that they live. Literature should be used to inculcate

sound moral values, social, economic and national consciousness into the psyche of learners at all levels of education.

As a way of showing the importance and relevance of literature to students' learning process, Chinweizu (1989) stated that:

A writer has professional responsibility to make his work relevant and intelligible to his society and its concerns. In focusing on these concerns, the matter for his poetry, novel or other historical writings may be historical, philosophical, sociological, scientific, fantastic or topical. He may choose to lampoon its foibles or castigate its wrong doings.

It therefore means that Chinweizu has been able to expose the extent to which literary writings cover all human endeavours and field of study in the world, as such importance of literature is seen in all ramifications. Every literary text falls within a specific historical period and postulates in its contents the sociological, political, economic, religious and moral values of its time, while giving prominence to the cultural values of the given society too.

Again, for the purpose of reflecting on the importance of teaching literature in schools as it concerns both the students and the society, Ekah observes that literary art serves as a reference point to the culture, tradition, and social life of the people in any society. It also provides enlightenment to the political and economic realities about a nation, because through the study of literature in schools, students learn a lot about the past and present events and incidents in our society. Moreover, it also portrays the folklore and tradition which serve as a major entertainment to the learners as a means of understanding the essence of using literature for enjoyment and learning.

### **Challenges of Teaching Literature in Secondary Schools**

Literature teaching in secondary schools faces a lot of challenges which are not easily surmountable by both the teachers and students. In most cases, the problems begin from the educational planners who represent the government at the national and state levels. Over a period of time now, literature teaching is difficult because of government policy on education. As an example, from the time of the introduction of 6-3-3-4 system of education in Nigeria, literature teaching at the Junior Secondary School level is subsumed under English Language and called English studies. The teachers of English studies as our research confirms prefer teaching only English language in a greater part of the periods allocated to the studies of English studies throughout the weeks, terms and school year.

The general complain which is normally heard from them is that of time. There is no special period allocated for the teaching of literature in the school time table at the junior level. The teachers therefore prefer using about four out of five periods in a week to the teaching of English language. Some of the teachers forget to teach literature entirely because the school authorities do not provide literature text books to them.

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Actually, the only time the teachers remember literature is during the Junior Secondary School Examination year, which is only the Js 3 class.

On the other hand, where the teachers have the literature text books, students do not have theirs. Out of a class of fifty students only two may have one out of four text books on literature recommended. This type of situation is not encouraging as it hampers the teacher's interest in the teaching of the subject. Literature text books should be made compulsory as English Language text is for all the students to buy. Education is obtained in order to change the individual's perception of the world and his environment, so if there is no proper teaching and learning by the students, such valued change becomes impossible.

As can be observed, one of the social functions of literature as expressed by Okolie (2002) is that literature is a factor to social change and that the writer and reader transforms into a pathfinder, a leader and a revolutionary, when social conditions overwhelm man, torn him into a victim who can no longer enjoy freely, his natural right to transform the society. Literary works read by students will help to transform the students from their Logocentric cultural ideas to modern liberal civilized human beings, if they have their books to read. The general observation is that when students have no literature text books to read, they have no ideas about the expected behaviour and morality of their society. They will not be able to trace or know their identity, political roots, economic endeavours and social relations.

Another major problem confronting effective teaching of literature is lack of any single text book for English studies which has both language and literature components. It becomes difficult for the English language teachers to shift their attention to literature text books or materials at the Junior secondary section. At the senior secondary section literature teaching becomes difficult because of the poor foundation at the Junior Secondary level. Students at the senior secondary level become complacent because of lack of text books to take care of NECO and WASC examination, since each examination body has a set of text books different from one another in all genres of literature.

### **Approaches to the Teaching of Literature**

Literature is a basic subject that enhances effective communication in English language, this is why at the tertiary level, English language department is a mixture of English and literature and studied side by side. At the secondary and primary education levels, various methods can be applied to enhance the teaching and learning of literature. The appropriate methodologies that are quite suitable in the teaching of literature are those that will bring practical lessons and students participation in class activities such methods include communicative, demonstration, role play, dramatization, miming and cognitive methods. Literature teaching acquired through communication method is not merely actuating an existing inert knowledge of the language, but it is the stimulating of the development of the language system itself (Odo 2007). This approach stimulates the

study of literature through language learning which is an effective method for communicating ideas and understanding of the contents, themes, subject matter, characters, events and incidents in literary works.

Rugh (1991) maintained that this methodology reflects the awareness of communicative needs as realized in terms of task-oriented and international activities which may require problem solving by completing information gaps, game-like activities, peer group work and debate in schools. This approach when applied to literature teaching enable students to be involved in practical demonstration and role play for easy understanding and remembrance of the major issues in literary work. In the same way, Williams (1990) stated that since language occurs in socio-cultural and interpersonal contexts, it reflects much more than limited linguistic purposes. Accordingly, he identifies the objective of communicative method of language teaching as geared towards communicative competence which is practically demonstrated in drama, prose and poetry teaching.

This concept to teaching literature specially refers to the social purpose of language usage which include, appropriateness of usage of vocabulary, conventional usage, connotative usage, figurative usage and interactional usage. The communicative method is based on the functional approach, because communication involves the creative and purposeful use of vocabulary according to the specific field of discourse, so this is evident in literary studies where language is applied for efficient communication. Functional approach according to Williams (1990) stated that priority should be given to communicative competence in language and literature teaching. Also content as an aspect of language and literature teaching should be emphasized without sacrificing grammatical form and moreover language and literary activities should be organized around specific classroom situation for specific communicative purposes.

### **Current Trends in Literature Teaching in Secondary Schools**

The current trend to the teaching of literature in Secondary school system is determined by the purposes of literary studies at secondary level. One major issue about the teaching of literature at this level is to improve the grammatical and linguistic competence among the learners of English Language. The essence of teaching literature is to enable the students to be exposed to a variety of novel sentences in form and style as well as oral teaching the students to major their oral performance in English Language through the use of dialogue in drama and poetry recitation. Literature serves as a major means to learn how to communicate appropriately using many different structural stylistic patterns. It is only in literature that all the rules of language usage are applied to different situations and discourses.

Since communication is a form of social interaction, communicative competence is therefore acquired through the process of social interaction which is evident in literary books. The characters in the novel interact continuously throughout their social relationship in episodes, events and incidents in the novels. For effective

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teaching of prose literature, the teacher should first identify the objectives of the lesson which may be themes, subject matter, social, political and economic problems, violence, disillusionment and frustration or oppression. The teacher should direct the students to the chapters, pages and paragraph where these themes and issues are. This will serve time and also enable the students to understand the focus and objectives of the lesson.

Also, in order to enable the students to understand what the lesson entails, the teacher should interpret the main points using practical demonstrative method, by describing the issues and using pictorals to portray the events and incidents graphically through his or her creative imagination in charts. Such scenery depiction in graphic form will encourage the students to remember what has been taught during the lesson especially in the senior secondary level of education. For the purposes of grammatical competence, care should be taken by the teacher to explain the important vocabulary connotatively and denotatively and if possible show how these vocabulary can be used in ordinary and general language usages to increase their vocabulary stock.

Moreover, communication involves authentic language usage as such students should be encouraged to explain the literary passages read in competent or good English model. To an extent, this exercise will enable the students to participate effectively in literary lessons and learn to use the language appropriately as well. The teacher should not hesitate correcting any grammatical errors observed which at the same time encouraging the students to forge ahead. The fluent use of the language will eventually enable the students to learn proper intonation, stresses and rhythm of the Standard English.

In order to engage the entire students in the class, the teacher should divide the class into groups of five or more students and assign specific roles for them to do in terms of reading certain chapters, pages containing vital facts of the lesson, so as to enable them to read and study the vocabulary in about ten minutes during the lesson. Thereafter some members of the group should be asked to explain to the class what they have discovered or understood from their reading, using their own words. If it is a drama lesson, the students should be encouraged by the teacher to engage in the textual dialogue according to teacher's guide to certain acts and scenes loud and clear.

Drama teaching should be used to assess students reading habit, voice quality, observations of stresses and intonation, so as to help them to become good speakers of English language and orators in public speaking. During the teaching of drama, the teacher should imprint on the minds of the students that drama is meant to be acted, as such they should speak loud and clear to the hearing of the class. This is one sure way of putting into practice what has been learned and also, it serves as a method of engaging them to take active part in the lessons. In this way, learning takes place even in a bilingual situation effectively.

Nwoga (1979) postulated that bilingualism enhances the transmission of ideas, the discovery of new expressiveness and new modes as shown in the manner which

African writers weld together English language and local vernacular in their literary writings transliteration or translations of local idioms, syntactic structures and use of local images to increase the acquisition of English vocabulary in their local language inventory. Partner (1979) opined that Achebe has produced something new and valuable to literature and English language from his narrative style using African thought patterns in idioms and syntactic structure. These postulations go on to add to the manner which literature teaching can help students to coin their own language usage from their cultural values and tradition also.

**Approaches to the Teaching of Literature** Azikiwe (1998) has suggested thirteen steps approach to the teaching of literature such as the followings:-

- i Paragraphs or Passages from the literary text should be read during the lesson. This should have been given to the learners as home work prior to the lesson.
- ii The teacher should give students the opportunity to read the text especially if it is in the lower class.
- iii. New words and poorly pronounced ones should be written on the board and used for pronunciation drills, spelling, dictation, denotative and connotative meanings.
- iv. Involve students as much as possible in discussion, analysis and description of the reading, while the teacher gives the proper perspective of the vision and focus of the author in the text.
- v. Both the teacher and his students should engage in question and answer session to elicit further explanations on: subject matter, themes, styles, moods and characters in the literary text.
- vi. The teacher should divide the students in his class into groups of four or five and assign either specific chapters, passages, paragraphs, events and incidents to each of the groups. This makes the students to be actively involved in the lesson during and after it. The process will enable them to be interested in the subject, lesson and so may long to read this and other literary texts afterward.
- vii. The teacher should arouse and sustain the interest of the learners by relating the lessons to real life's situation, cultures and environment of the students thereby proving that literature is all about human life in their environments.
- viii. The teacher should guide the learners to elicit implicit and explicit meanings from the materials read, through the use of the outline from the textual contents and situations.
- ix. The learners should be guided on how to identify such elements of literature like: plot, theme, background/setting, subject matter, characterization, style, diction, figures of speech and mood in literary works at different class lessons.
- x. To make the lesson very interesting, the teacher should make use of instructional materials, visual and aural aids as well as charts.
- xi. The teacher should give the learners both essay and context type questions as class work and home work so as to enable them to read the text most effectively for the purpose of understanding the text 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.

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xiii. The teachers should encourage the students to do intensive and extensive reading privately at home using both prescribed and unprescribed texts. According to Oyetuyi (1971), these advantage of intensive reading is to get the students into an independent study, use of words in English language from the contexts of the authors, and the denotative meanings thereby enhancing new vocabularies and free expressions.

### **Conclusions**

The paper has been able to postulate the role of literature for communicative competence. Moreover, the teachers of literature should learn to apply the approaches and methods expressed in the paper for effective teaching and leaning by teachers and students. Again as a way of increase performance in language and literature at the SSCE examinations, the syllabuses of the major examination bodies should be harmonized, because as it is presently, it is too large for effective studies in secondary school system. On the other hand, the teachers of English language and English studies should use literature to encourage students to increase their vocabulary competence and also use literature to teach oral practice of stress, rhythm, intonation and oratory in poetry, drama and prose lessons.

### **Recommendations**

Given the lofty benefits that are there in studying literature is a bonafide subject, the following recommendations are made:

1. Literary arts should be made a compulsory subject of study at all levels of education since its reading leads to increased reading speed in other subjects.
2. Literary texts should be made available at accessible cost to encourage students to buy.
3. Governments, individuals, corporate agencies should render assistance to writers and publishers in area of writing and publishing literary texts.
4. Only qualified teachers of literature should be employed to teach the subject for optimum outputs.
5. Students of science and other disciplines should use literary texts to engage in extensive reading to sharpen their intellect and communication competence.
6. Literary artists should capture in their texts our peculiar socio-economic, political, cultural and religious backgrounds.
7. Literary text should be made captivating as much as possible to capture the interest of the audience especially the juvenile audience who love striking cover page, inside illustrations etc.
8. School heads should be sure that enough time is allotted to literature in the school time table just as any other subject.
9. Literature class should not be annexed to English language class as it is currently being practiced in our school system under English studies.



It is believed that when these current issues raised in this paper are adopted, literary arts shall have fulfilled its functions in the society for this will lead to more interest in teaching and learning the subject.

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