

THE ADVANTAGES OF LITERATURE TO LEARNERS: A REVIEW

Dr. Vicky M. Sylvester

Abstract

There is a need to revisit the approaches to language teaching and study using relevant literature to meet the needs of students. There are many concerns of literature, the primary is the various windows it opens to people who read it. Literature provides a way to the creative process/thinking-preparation, incubation, inspiration and verification, all applicable to science as well as the arts, because there is a dependence on "connecting bodies of knowledge that previously appear unconnected" (Garnham and Oakhill, 1994: 213). In language a good foundation is laid by reading literary works. The students who is exposed early to good foundation is laid by reading literary works. The student who is exposed early to good literature will no doubt acquire language skills that will be limited to one who has not. This leads to good performance in secondary school and consequently at university. This paper focuses on student performance in tertiary institution based on previous strength or weakness in literature at secondary schools as a result of the teaching strategies and reading resources.

Introduction

Literature mirrors life, society and the people that inhabit it and what they do-friendship, community, environment, justice, tales or biographies of disaster, survival, homelessness, people in history, pioneers, technology, fantasy, mythology, civil war, disturbances of religion or political issues. Literature prepares learners to contribute in speech and actions as productive members of their societies.

Literature engages its reader in a complex set of emotional, symbolic, moral, intellectual and social considerations. It uses the normal means of communication, language, images, symbols, codes, stories., but uses them with more complexity and subtlety than is normal in everyday communication. In addition literature avails itself of a certain sensibility we have to such things as form, sensual experience, rhythm, repetition, contrast, which sensibility we call the 'aesthetics'¹. In literature, reading and study are closely allied and the more one learn how literature works, the more open one is to the effects that it can have.

Literature is important because it is at the heart of the reading process, the core of the syllabus. A love for reading should be encouraged from an early age because as Bright and McGregor (1970:74), observe:

1. It help the readers to acquire speed and skills they will need for practical purpose when they leave school. (1971:132) further notes that reading goes beyond conversion of print of sound with some level of comprehension to skills of book selection, the use of reading, critical reading, comparing texts, location references and so on.
2. General knowledge comes through reading and, the more understanding a student has the ' more books he can read. The knowledge further helps to sharpen the reader's insight, widen her experience and provides occasions for exercise of judgement about man which makes such a reader capable of the appropriate response to life.
3. experience of literature is an essential part of education, as it raises the level at which the mind can function.
4. reading is an easy route to command of the language. It guarantees the exercise of mental powers at full stretch and as McGregor et al (1970:2100), say, it is there he will find words passionately or delicately conveying emotions or altitudes¹
5. finally, an avid reader is generally well organized, disciplined individual with an eye for aesthetics. Taking part in the process of creative imagining and experiencing the order with which it is presented, she transfers this orderliness into her life as well.

When a student has achieved the foregoing we say she is literate and competent because she has acquired skills and ability that help her desist from:

- i. Sub-vocalizing and looking at each word while reading?
- ii. Looking back frequently and following print with her finger?
- iii. Referring to the dictionary but rather inferring meaning of unfamiliar words from contextual or internal clues?
- iv. She should also have acquired the ability to discriminate in the selection of reading materials.

Students of literature at the secondary school gain competence as readers and acquire "wisdom" in their exploration of the texture of meaning of human experience. Literature also creates possible worlds, represents and explores the way in which the world is viewed and experienced by people in that society, uses cultural codes to establish meaning and relationships, aids our ability to use language accurately, freshly and complexly, models and examines subject positions. Literature is also a form of cultural discourse, and has functions within the culture as a whole.

The foregoing functions of literature briefly stated, show that literature plays an important role in the general performance of students in all subjects. The variety of books students select raise questions that require resources that go beyond the books thus opening avenues for technology or science and history behind the book topic. Literature is important for students of English at tertiary institutions, which is why no institution can afford to have separate degree for language and literature at the first degree level as is the case in some Nigerian Universities where the aim is simply to make teaching easier as a result of large classes. At this level the learner centered approach focuses on students responses to the literature read and studied. Students are actively engaged in reading through making choices, discussing and constructing meaning. Such strategy engages students in higher level thinking and reflection by encouraging collaboration and constructing meaning with other readers. These literary discussions are guided by students' insights, observations and questions. They may be related to the characters, setting plot and author, along with connection to student experiences. Learners often take on a variety of roles in their group and learn to facilitate their own discussion and projects.

It is important to note that a sound approach in book selection, choice of books and group discussions are at the core of helping students to develop the necessary skills for good performance and balanced role played in future endeavors.

The Problem

The poor performance of students in language is as a result of a poor learner- centered approach in literature, which focuses on solution rather than a balanced literacy program that involves small groups that explore a piece of literature in depth through the grade levels and subject areas. The application of this approach evolves time, as students through proper guidance by teachers become more experienced readers by the time they get to higher institutions.

It must be emphasized that rather than a total reliance on basics, textbooks, or short excerpts, students should be encouraged to read novels, short stories, plays historical fictions, biographies and other rich popular or classical literature. Apart from the inadequacy of approach many school deprive students of literature learning as early as .IS 3 and thus, create a marked difference between the performance of students who offered literature and those who did not their language examinations in SS. 3 There is in addition a significant difference between their overall performance at the end of their final year at the university.

To reverse this problem of poor performance in language, there is the need to re-examine and or adjust the literature syllable, which is largely the theory to practice approach and the need to allow literature all students through secondary schools.

The paper reviews the right approaches to language competence through the choice of books, discussions, role, tools adopted, and notes the importance and necessity of compulsory literary engagement at secondary schools, first year at university for all students and throughout undergraduate levels for English students. It assesses the problem of relevance which makes it mandatory for evaluating what is on ground in order to determine whether or not the books address the students. If on the contrary, there will be the need to modify and tailor it towards the good of both the secondary school curriculum and the tertiary institution to which the students proceed.

The Need for Literature at all Levels of Secondary Education

There is the inseparable relationship between literature and language. Education in all fields, demand a study of books and papers. Yet the aim should not be to read and cram but to read in such a way as to understand and remember. The student who wants to learn English will have to read himself into a knowledge of it (Bright and McGregor 1970). This means there is no alternative to reading and understanding of English and writing it well which in turn translates into good performance in other subjects.

Students must be encouraged to realize early that they will benefit immensely from the reading and study of literature as reading and study are closely allied. The more one learns how literature works the more open one is to the effects that it can have. This means the more one gains competence as a reader, the richer and more engaging one's insights and reflections concerning all areas of study one engages in. at this level the student is learning to use language and imagination more fully and consciously and think about and imagine the world more accurately and deeply.

The student's ability to conceptualize analyze and to some extent, feel as every adult teacher has come to realize, is dependent on our ability to use the means of communication in precise and effective ways and to engage oneself in a continuing process of refining one's capacities to use language and one's sensibilities to good language use. Literature teaches the reader to be more alert to the whole range of ideas, feelings, images, and symbols which ground our political, social and private lives.

Schools debates competitions are common at secondary schools. Competitors are often given texts or news paper articles to aid their understanding in addition to the current views ideas on the subject. Debates encourage reflective thought and higher thinking. It exposes the students to various forms of criticism and trains them to criticize themselves and accept criticism gracefully. Literature thus, provides at this level, the language with which to conceptualize and talk about their experiences. This access to the language of experience, gives the students access to their own experience in a way that they did not previously have and locale that experience within a cultural frame. Literature is a bridge to the command of language because it is here that the students will find words which express sensual experience, contrast and rhythm and helps them exercise mental power and a sense of privilege.

Reference to SSCE Syllabus

Poor performance by final students in English language at SSCE in Nigeria in 2007 is even more alarming than when Ayodele (1984) noted that poor performance in comprehension was" worrisome. The situation was not better in 1994 when the Educational Research Council also showed its dismay after conducting its research on the performance of Nigerian secondary school students in public examinations noting that despite English being Nigeria's official language as well as a compulsory course in secondary schools, it is the subject in which the candidates have recorded their worst performance.

This paper puts to question the secondary school curriculum and its assessment strategies. The Nigeria Education Research and Development Council in its regular reviews of the curriculum recommended some variables related to the issue of academic performance. Some critical questions raised are whether-the-methodology-is up-to-date -and whether it takes cognizance of current trends in language teaching which to this writer are largely practical and most importantly, an effective linkage of literature and language teaching in a most practical way.

If these variables are summed in the content of the present national senior secondary curriculum as:

- i. Reading for critical evaluation
- ii. Reading to follow writer's line of thought
- iii. Reading to summarize main points
- iv. Reading to grasp word meanings in various contexts '
- v. Reading for implied meaning, suggestions and writer's purpose
- vi. Listening for the main points
- vii. Listening for implied meaning
- viii. Listening to identify speakers purpose or tone

Then the methodology of reading and discussion must go beyond finding solution (o

questions as is often done by teachers to enthusiastic, informal contributions that encourage reading that is not examination centered.

Teaching Methods and their Degree of Usefulness (Theory to Practice at SSCE and Tertiary Institutions)

Methodology is the appropriate order in which teaching is facilitated. A wrong methodology will flaw teaching and consequently learning. That is why teaching at all levels must go beyond theory to practice. This is where the literature circles come handy.

Literature circles involve small groups of students exploring a piece of literature in depth. The method involves guided reading and discussion. The teacher asks questions that aid thinking and reflection. Construction meaning with other students Ayodele (1985: 64), may have been thinking of this method when he outlined the frequency with which each teaching method can be used as well as a degree for its usefulness as shown below:

Our survey in this paper and other like (Ayodele and Olagbaiye 1985), show that poor performance begins with a lack of reading culture among some students as well as unqualified and incompetent teachers, and a large population of students with limited books makes literature circles difficult to obtain their objectives. The goal of literature circles is enthusiastic, natural, informal conversation that encourages a life-long love of reading. At the university, the admission of unsuitable students, unavailable texts, mother tongue interference among other problems, there is a general poor performance among students as well as the inappropriate application of teaching methods.

Among curriculum based methods designed for teaching at the secondary or tertiary institutions, the functional syllabus is especially important in reading and teaching literature. This is aimed at motivating learners to gain communicating skills. In a class where students are encouraged to take on roles such as discussion director, wacky word finder, travel, super summarizer, passage picker and interest investigator it keeps the discussion fresh and interesting and allows the students to focus on different cognitive perspectives related to their reading. They also draw on different intelligences. Rotating the roles at different is an added interest. At first the roles maybe primarily directed at the reading. For example, for a give chapter one student writes discussion questions, another visualizes the setting through art, while still another student identifies new vocabulary or interesting passages. As these roles become a natural part of the group, the teacher shifts the roles to be more activity specific. The role titles below can be used to get started thinking about the possibilities:

Discussion Director	Wacky Word Finder	Super Selector	Artsy Artist Passage
Cool Connector	Super Summarizer	Travel Tracer	Picker Alternative
Idea Investigator	Literary Luminator	Interest Illustrator	Advocate

One main skill we can extract from the foregoing method is communicating skill. The role played by group members emphasis communicative competence and as Longe (1991:84) and William (1991:76), all agree, fluency in speaking and writing, quickness in understanding what is spoken or written and ability to use language appropriately in its socio-cultural and interpersonal aspects are at the core of developing communicative competence.

The lecture method and the grammar translation approach are among the least conducive for teaching comprehension. If students are to perform well and with a relative degree of automatism, reading, discussions as well as the questioning technique are among the most relevant facilitators of learning, that can be employed. When the comprehension text is read out, discussed in class and questions are asked on it, there is more likelihood that the average student will comprehend the material.

In the area of comprehension and summary, novels, short stories, plays and historical fiction are best for illustrations in small group that are participatory. It must however, be noted that this method could appear difficult to an inexperienced teacher with large classes. Inadequate hours are also allocated for comprehension. The scheme of work for English language in some government schools offer comprehension three times in a term. The senior schools comprehension topics aim to test on a general perspective rather than teach. Many use basics or short excerpts from text books, variety is lacking and so are choices which are also lacking in cultural diversities and technology-rich literature,. It is therefore easy to deduce from these inadequacies why poor performance is recorded not only in English but in all other subjects.

One way suggest syllabus models in addition to the ones and Willams (1990), had made but the emphasis is on well trained teachers to implement. The National Policy on Education (1981), was not ignorant of this fact when it noted that 'no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers. The secondary and tertiary institutions owe the system and their students the duty to be selective in its teachers who will in turn be selective in the choices they make.

The Role of Teacher

Literature is the vehicle that takes other people's cultures into homes Kilometers apart around the world. Language and literature are thus significant instruments for enhancing understanding and unity in multilingual societies such as Nigeria. At secondary schools, students are expected to, firstly, read prescribed novelettes after which the teacher asks questions to test for understanding. Comprehension is at the core of this development process which depicts in stages or levels of the reading process. (Southgate et al. 1981), the students is also expected to ask questions or make contributions that agree or disagree with certain ideas, setting, plot or character. The teacher is thus satisfied that comprehension has been achieved.

Secondly, and an even better approach to experienced reading by both teachers and students is to allow students make choices of the books they read (Laura Candler, 2000). This will result in active discussions and constructing meaning. The teacher allows discussions to be guided by students' insights observations and questions, which may be related to students experiences in some way connected or related to the character, setting, plot and author.

The teacher guides students in selecting books that are not above or below their reading level. More students are motivated by book choice that fall within their cultural or religious references. And because such books are familiar to the students they will have some background information that helps their understanding and engage them-actively Ayodele (1984:47), has rightly shown his disappointment with the poor performance of students in the comprehension and summary exercises at secondary school examinations. This points to the fact that an essential element of skill and knowledge in the curriculum is either missing or not being properly implemented. The generally poor performance of students in English shows a general lack of proficiency in the four language skills which according to the Grieve report of 1964, include the ability to speak fluent and acceptable English, ability to understand simple conversational English spoken at normal speed, ability to comprehend contemporary written English of a level appropriate to the candidates age and required level of attainment and ability to write clear acceptable English on required topics.

All these take their cue from literary expositions which are the basic material for comprehension. It is when the student can comprehend and construct meaning into what she reads that she can be said to be competent in her use of language which will in turn apply to other subjects.

Review of Available Study of Literature as an Added Advantage

A review of some studies on effects of knowledge of literature as a added advantage in performance of language and by extension other subjects serves as the conclusion to this paper. We could never exhaust available studies on the importance of literature as an advantage to learners. Proffered empirical evidence from a study of the committee on reading of the Scottish Council of Research in education, that children in Scotland enter school at the age of five and begin the study of reading. This means that a good way to build reading readiness is by instruction in reading as early as possible. Brown also cites McDowell's study of Catholic schools where much literature is encouraged and found that the look and say classes were superior on many tests particularly on paragraph comprehension, reading rate and use of the index. Brown, conclude that 'for some reason the act of reading is held to be virtuous...'

Wellek and Warren (1984), are of the view that 'every work of literary art is, first of all, series of sounds out of which arises the meaning'. These authors (1975), emphasize that language is quite literary the material of the literary artist. Every literary work is merely a selection from a given language Bateson (1974), argued that literature is (he general history of language and is completely dependent on it. We therefore, study language by using literature as a document or as material for the history of the English language. Secondly, literary works can be used as sources and documents for other purposes such as investigation into linguistic science or other subjects.

Tone is as important to language as it is in literature. Tone patterns can be phonological or grammatical with its pervasive restrictions. The lexical representation of tone and the nature of tone rules have generated debates which are of interest to the literary whose characters draw on the rules which have a phonetic motivation and those with grammatical basis Hyman (1975:33), recalls education in the middle ages with its 'tradition of technical linguistic instruction which

concerned itself with questions of style that have become the province of the literary critic. The medieval educational curriculum was based on the seven liberal arts', areas of study to be distinguished from mechanical arts such as carpentry. The seven were divided into the Trivium, consisting of grammar, dialect (or logic) and Rhetoric, and the Quadrivium, consisting music, Arithmetic, Geometry and Astronomy. Great writers like Dante, Virgil, were seen as men of great learning owing to their masterly technique Johnson who produced the first dictionary became popular when it was discovered in chanced commentary that he was familiar with medieval authorities, concerned with Rhetoric, the study of structure and style.

We have stated elsewhere that material chosen for teaching Nigerian students should reflect the cultural linguistic peculiarities of African literature in addition to the Western with its corps of norms Aire (2000:1), opines that both the anthropological and aesthetic realities should be upheld as 'much of what African literature has to offer will be lost if a critic limits himself to just one of the options. Aire further observes in his 'stylistic Appraisal of Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*' (p. 79- 88) that he is 'quite aware that to attempt to separate the medium from the message, the form from the content, is often as impossible as trying to separate hot from cold water in a container. The work then dwells on discussion of lexicon, syntax, figures of speech, literary devices, narration, narrative techniques and devices as well as the study of character names otherwise called onomastics. This point simply emphasizes the inclusive nature of literature and language and the professional approach to teaching and learning.

Awonusi (2001:54-5), notes literature provides a practice field for the creativity of language as expressed at all genre levels: drama poetry and the novel and how literature encourages talking i.e. the exploitation of creative oral expressiveness in language which serves every politically inclined individual. This bound to be a welcome development on the intersection of the two fields (language and literature) since language remains primarily oral. This explains why Angmor et al (1997:158), advocated a rethink or a redesign of the language classroom because according to them, one important way of bringing the second language learner closer to the target language is by using literature in the language classroom.

The obvious conclusion here is that our tertiary institution must enforce if need be, a retraining as well as a redesigned syllabus which will unmistakable filter to the secondary schools. The observations above show that a variety of prose materials will help learners since language and literature are inseparable. Teachers of English are encouraged to exploit integrative teaching approaches if communicative competence and good performance are to be achieved.

References

- Aire, v. O. (2002) *African Literature and Criticism* Jos: bookhouse Inc.
- Awonusi, O. (2001). Teaching English language through literature in Lawal, F. O (2001) *Reading in Literature and Other Disciplines*. Lagos Joss Publishers.
- Ayodele, S. O. (1985). *Journal of Research in curriculum Vol. 3 No. 2* Lagos CES AC Bright and McGregor
- (1970). *Teaching English as a Second Language* London: Long Brown, R. (1968). Reading of the Scottish council of Research in Education, New York, Williams, David (1990). *Engl Lang. Teaching: An Integra Approach*. Ibadan: Spectrum books.
- Candler L. (2000). In Schlick Noe, K. L. Website for primary and intermediate/middle grades and secondary grades.
- Clymerm, P. in Southgate .Let (1981). *Extending, Beginning Reading*: London, heinemann educational Books
- Garnham, A and Oakhili J. (1994). *Thinking and Reasoning Oxford*: Blackwell Publishers. Hyman, L. M (1975). *Phonology: Theory and Analysis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Levine, G. (1981). *Introduction Statistics for Psychology: Logic and method* U. S. A Robinson, T. H. (1986). *Activities Writing*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company

