

LITERATURE IN NIGERIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Abstract

Futile will be all debates that do not address the primary focus and redirection of our educational system. At present, the educational system is not only moribund and financially asphyxiated but systematically faulty, perceptively myopic and standardly grounded. To this end, this paper examines the study of literature in Nigerian Colleges of education in relation to its place, status and function. Literature courses in the Colleges of Education need to be repositioned so as to put it on a sound footing considering its centrality and the training of teachers of literature to the attainment of national objectives. The paper therefore, emphasizes that literature has a definite role to play in social change, national integration and development.

Introduction

Higher Education as referred to in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1981), covers the post secondary section of the national education system and it is given in Universities, Polytechnics as well as Colleges of Education. To this end, Colleges of Education are part of the higher education in Nigeria as well as the wider academic activity called Teacher Education. This is why the National Policy on Education emphasized that Teacher Education will continue to be given due emphasis in educational planning because no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers.

In fact, one of the most current topical issues in educational circles in Nigeria is whether or not the form of teacher preparation as provided or undertaken in the country's teacher training institutions is adequate to cope with the challenges which lie ahead. After all good education must be qualitative, focused and functional. Qualitative and functional education is not possible without teachers of high quality. This is so because teachers are the main determinants of quality in any quality in any educational system. The state may spend upwards of 40% of its annual budget on education, sound policies on education may be formulated, commissions upon commissions may prepare laudable reports on education and all children of school age may be in school, but unless teachers are adequately prepared for their jobs, nothing-much will be achieved. The reports simply will be ineffective and the children will be school without being educated. This implies that if the learner is the center of any educational system, the teacher is the center of the quality of education.

The statement above clearly shows the need for the production of qualitative teachers, in the society in order to accomplish the following five objectives of the National Policy on Education (NPE):

1. a free and democratic society;
2. a just and egalitarian society;
3. a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
4. a great and dynamic economy;
5. a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

It therefore, follows that if Nigeria wants to achieve the national objectives outlined above, great attention must be paid to the production of qualitative teachers who will effectively translate policies into practice and theories into action. Therefore, teachers, in the twenty-first century should be able to transmit the accumulated knowledge of the past and interpret it with reference to the present. This function is not reserved only to the teachers of history and social studies but it is equally the obligation of the teachers of Literature and the varied subjects found in the modern curriculum. They must be able to guide students on how to use knowledge in the present to prepare the ground for the future because they are members of a modern society which is always evolving. Teachers must understand major trends in contemporary civilization and prepare the young to meet adequately the problems they will encounter as they approach maturity.

The Challenges of Literature in Nigerian Colleges of Education

Twenty-six years the implementation of the new National Policy on Education, however, not much has been accomplished in terms of attaining the goals of teacher training education either due to lack of proper focus or misplacement of priority or unplanned changes in the educational system by different governments in Nigeria. Therefore, in spite of governments' insistence that NCE remains the minimum entry qualification into the teaching profession, communicative competence that should be a teacher's main instrument and which Literature is in a better position to provide is taken too lightly.' For the teacher, his credibility is almost entirely anchored on his competence in communicating ideas and stimulating learning through creative use of language.: Articulate and well-spoken teachers almost invariably win the hearts and respect of their learners. Good performance in creative application of language, especially spoken language defines personality.

The role of Literature in language learning and the need for adequate preparation for teaching it cannot be over emphasized. Literature is the creative application of language. It is language that pleases, but it pleases in a special way. The pleasure that Literature gives comes not only from the message, content or meaning it conveys but from the way it is expressed; it is not the message alone that makes literature, but the play of language that gives it form. It is not the message alone that makes literature, but the play of language that gives it form. It is an imaginative work of art which expresses certain message through the vehicles of a highly embellished language which is peculiar and greatly decorated with artistic ornaments.

Aside from the constructive role that Literature plays in improving the students' language skills, it is a pivotal means for honing the students open mindedness, giving them real opportunities to be exposed to foreign cultures and foreign peoples. Language and linguistic courses are primary concerned with the theoretical aspects of language, principles, a knowledge which, to some degree, restrains the students' use of language - more or less. In fact, literary awareness provides extra features that help improve the students' command of English and ability to use language freely, not solely as a linguistic, but as a cultural, intellectual, social and psychological medium of expression. As a matter of fact, linguistics would want students to learn about rather than learn the language. Exercises which concentrate on learning about the language would turn-students into passive recipients rather than creative producers of language. Thus, not only does literature provide the student with a considerably wide variety of syntax and vocabulary, but it also exposes the students to language used at its best. Since, on the basis of giving empirical evidence, literature has a very effective and subtle impact on students' language skills and linguistic performance, students should not therefore, be forbidden to study it. For it is only from literature that the students can obtain the skills he/she needs. Accordingly, it should follow that the more Literature courses offered, the greater the change will be for students in the English programmes of Colleges of Education in Nigeria not only to improve, but hopefully to be able to use English impeccably. Linguistics like Roland Barthes would say, can give literature the generative model which is the principles of all science, since it is a matter of making use of certain rules to explain particular results.

The language - oriented courses lay the foundations for language proficiency which is a fine task indeed but which fails to provide actual exposure to the language at its best to help develop subtle and sophisticated-language knowledge. Such courses as John (1989), perceptively remarks, cannot provide students with much language competence, with an awareness of the full range of its expressive potential.

As students in the College of Education are taught Literature-in-English, lecturers should also teach them how to read closely and critically, and supply them with proper skills as they open the door to a deeper appreciation and understanding of literature, both as an object or ideological and cultural analysis, and as a linguistic activity of reading and writing.

In the study of Literature, language occupies central position. This is because literature as an imaginative work of art expresses certain messages through the vehicle of highly embellished language. However, Literature performs other primary functions apart from the promotion of "Language ability". For a study of P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* reveals the special way language is beautifully decorated to convey the intention of the poet. The text deals with socio-social problems common in many rural areas of East Africa and other parts of Africa, that is, Africa caught in a web of change. The text is heavily loaded with incisive, figurative language in order to sanitize

Africans like Tina who are often tempted to abandon and even ridicule their own traditional culture and civilization.

Tina, one of the major characters, is portrayed as victim of a clash of cultures. She is a caricature of her real self who fits neither here nor there, that is, unattractive by Africans standards and cannot represent the white people fully. This is further revealed by the following excerpts:

Who says you are beautiful
When you cannot even walk?
You stagger into the sunlight
Melting, dripping; wet
A pregnant hippo,
Soft, flabby, weak
Bursting buttocks

The poet only manipulates words to drive his point home in the poem. The functional and aesthetic aspect of the lines above make it possible for any message conveyed through it to stick faster and longer to the human memory. The scathing criticism of Tina revolting figure makes her a pathetic creature comes out clearly.

Literature is a useful tool in the teaching of English language. Every good teacher of English Language should know that one of the effective ways of teaching vocabulary is through inference from context. A teacher could lift extracts from literature texts give a brief background story on the extracts and go ahead to teach the vocabulary items he intends the learner to know. To justify this claim we shall take a look at the following extracts:

Passage I

... Welcome Address presented to Michael Obi Okonkwo, B. A. (Hons) London, by the officers and members of the Umuofia Progressive Union on the occasion of his return ... The Golden Fleece ... Fie spoke of the Umuofia which could now join the comity of other towns in their march towards ... progress. Oru people have a saying. "Ours is ours, but mine is mine" ... at this momentous epoch in our political evolution of today, we have such an *invaluable* possession in the person of our *illustrious* son ... (Achebe: No Longer at Ease).

Passage II

Change and Waiyaki *trudged* on. The path they followed was unknown lo Waiyaki as he had never gone that far along Honia river. He was content to follow his father, who led the way through ... thorns and creeping plants. Waiyaki was often caught in the network of plants and thorns, sometimes *extricating* himself with difficulty. (Ngugi: The River Between).

The teacher could present the extracts to the class to go through, he could engage students in brief discussion of the passages. This could be done through skillful designed questions like the following:

How would you feel if you were Obi? How should Waiyaki react each time he was entangled in the thorn?

The questions are meant to transport the learners into the imaginative world created by these passages before they engage in the actual in the deduction of the meaning of the vocabulary items underlined. Thus, the discussion should be very direct and snappy. The class may be divided into groups and each group and each group is asked to substitute the underlined word with suitable words that will best explain them. The whole class comes together again to discuss the meaning of the vocabulary items. The substitution is, no doubt, impossible without inference. Following the teacher's background story on the passages and the linguistic environment in which the vocabulary items occurs, inferring their meaning from the context will not be a very difficult exercise for the learners. This method has numerous advantages over other methods like the dictionary or direct vocabulary teaching by the teacher. This method is also most effective in teaching items that might appear confusing to the learners because of their knowledge of how lexical items assume different semantic status through

process of affiliation. When a lexical item deviates from the pattern that is most common, most people tend to misunderstand such an item. For example, we know that certain words form their opposites by adding the prefix "in" for instance:

Appropriate	-	inappropriate
Considerate		inconsiderate
Definite		indefinite
Dependence	-	independence
Effective		ineffective

Following this example, learners might wrongly assume "invaluable" to be the opposite of valuable. But using the contextual approach, especially as it appears in the first extract. It is unlikely for any student who follows the trend of the welcoming address to Obi Okonkwo to think that "invaluable" is the opposite of "valuable".

Extracts like the ones above could serve multiple purposes. They can be used for teaching of writing composition as well. In that case, other details left out might need to be included. As Aliyu (1996), says, the more learners practice with samples, the better they are likely to become. Learners who have gone through the first extract could be asked to write a welcome address to the first medical doctor in their village who have just returned from London. The sample they have encountered will guide them in their work. Emphasis in Language teaching in modern times has been on the communicative approach. This is to prepare learners for the communicative role they will perform outside school. To develop their communicative competencies, they are made to engage in activities that will enhance communication. This could be in form of role-play or other activities that could adequately prepare them for life after school such as seeking direction to a new place, giving short address of speech on a special occasion, recounting a past incident and so on. In the case of role-play a particular incident can be taken from a literature text and re-enacted by learners. Interesting episodes like discussion between Lakunle and Sidi on payment of bride-price in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* or the meeting of the boys - conch episode in Gelding's *The Lion of the Flies* may be used to engage learners to perform various acts thereby developing in them the ability to competently handle any communicative role that is expected of them. From these illustrations, it will be discovered that language learning through Literature is easier, more interesting and above all, the knowledge acquired is retained in learners memory for a longer period due to the variety of activities they engage in. therefore, the views expressed re-emphasized the need for proper teaching of Literature in English in the teacher training institutions-Consequent upon the above, the content of the syllabus should be carefully determined in order to realize the stated objectives. The approach to and the presentation of Literature must be taken-into cognizance while preparing the Literature curriculum. The machinery for determining the choice of texts and the interpretation should be done properly and not taken for granted. The curriculum designers should a step further Jo specify text;; to bo read at the Colleges of Education. One of .the chief reasons for poor selection is inability of some teachers to choose relevant texts that will lead the country to the attainment of national objectives. In other words, the content of Literature syllabus should be most fulfilling as far as the purpose of Teacher Education is concerned. This is because quality teachers will always produce high quality students and this will aid the country in her development strides.

The above emphasis is based on the mode of teaching literature in the Colleges of Education, which made English to eclipse Literature-in -English. Moreover, there is no indication that proper orientation is given on how to approach the literature syllabus in terms of its interpretation. And this is very necessary because the teacher occupies an important position, he must realize the power of Literature and allow it to influence him and eventually brings this to bear upon his students. Bakunle (1996), observed that: without doubt art has potential power. If it does not or if it is not regarded powerful, political leaders all over Africa would not he too anxious to nib its power by jailing writers and banning their works from circulation.

For instance, Oswald Mtshali's poems in "Sounds of a Cowhide Drum" (1980), reflecting the human condition in the urban ghetto and the poems of protest or indictment were banned in South Africa when the power of his irony was later discovered. Some of the poems in this category are: "Nightfall in Soweto", "Intake Night" - Baragwanalh Hospital", Pigeons at Openheimer Park", "Always a Suspect", "The Face of Hunger" and "Boy on a Swing". Others jailed are Jack Mapanke of

Malawi, for of Chameleons and gods (1981), Ngugi Wa Thiong 'O for I Will Marry when I want (1983), not to be forgotten are cases of Dennis Brutus and also Wole Soyinka.

The choice of texts for study in the College of Education needs to be reassessed. For instance, it was observed that Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel* has been in use at the College of Education, Minna, for more than ten years. The lecturers have free hand to select what is most convenient for them with little or no regard to contemporary issues in the society. A drama text like Ngugi and Micere's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* would suffice. Here the issues of neocolonialism could be discussed and likened to Nigerian situation today where we have two laws and two justice.

Kimathi: Two laws. Two justice. One law and one justice pretexts the man of properly: the man of wealth ... Another law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people.

This is not to say that the presenter is unappreciative of the high quality literary works in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1965), in which the writer tries to explain Nigeria's predicament as evident in socio-political consequences of past-colonial maladministration, corruption and ethnic chauvinism. These early works do not have the revolutionary forces associated with Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1980) and *Petals of Blood* (1977).

To this end, the teachers of literature in Colleges of Education should be able to identify the national objectives of Nigeria as stated in Second National Development Plan. It is necessary for the teachers of literature to consider the country's national objectives as well as the relevance of the themes of literary texts selected as curriculum to the objectives before selecting literary work for his students. The texts selected do not have to be only texts written by Africans or about Africans in as much as the selection is capable of helping the learner to recognize the truth of the fictional representation when he compares them with his everyday observations. This is to say that, non-African literature, when carefully selected and taught with the societal needs at the back of the teachers mind, helps to broaden the learner's horizon as well as foster his understanding and appreciation of other cultures. For instance, it is the desire of Nigeria to build a free and democratic society. In spite of this role objective, democracy has eluded the country for the greatest part of her years of nationhood. For instance, the students study Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as shown in their syllabus. The teacher of literature in Nigeria should not have any problem in relating the ambition of African leaders and the action of some coup plotters respectively. Caesar is a successful military ruler who allows his success to turn his head. As a result, he aspires to become king. His friends want him crowned while his detractors plan to kill him just to make sure he is not made king. In spite of all odds, Caesar proceeds to the capital for coronation and he is assassinated. There is no doubt that the African child, in fact the Nigerian child is quite aware of political leaders and military leaders who are inordinately ambitious and wish to be president for life; he is equally aware of coup plotters who assassinate Heads of State without any concrete plan for the nation just like the conspirators who kill Caesar without any plan at all for the people.

Similarly, Nigeria aims at building "a just and egalitarian society" as well as "Land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens" (NPE, 1981). Again Aminata Sow Fall's *Beggars' Strike* is a relevant text for study here. The Senegalese female writer talks on the exploitation of the beggars by the privileged members of the society like Mour Ndiaye the Director of the Department of Public Health Hygiene. God but because of the interest of one who has given. Beggars were regarded as the dregs of the society who absolutely have nothing meaningful to offer until they revolted by using strike action to press home their demand. The humiliation they suffered on the streets stopped as they maintained their position and decide on what to be given. Their dignity is now restored as they refuse to beg around. Salla Niang, the leader of the beggars advised his colleagues not up in spite of suffering. That they will soon realize that the society need them if it is to survive and prosper. Mour Ndiaye was later seen pleading to the beggars to accept his alms to enable him secure the seat of the Vice President of the Republic. The teacher of literature has the unique duty of drawing the attention of his students to the need for perseverance and suffering in the struggle to build a society in which all citizens are treated with justice and equality.

Similarly, a country that is victim of instability as a result of purposeless, violent changes of government, a co unify where people are indolent, where nepotism, bribery and corruption, crave for wealth, discriminatory justice, mutual mistrust and vindictiveness are allowed to thrive cannot develop. The

literature teacher then has a duty of drawing the attention of his students to the various societal shortcomings portrayed by the writers. He also has the responsibility of inculcating in them the desire to fight the evils in the most patriotic manner. The literature teacher, therefore, must, while selecting the literary texts to be studied by his students, consider the relevance of such texts to the needs and demands of the society and develop an effective methodology for teaching them. There is no doubt that a purposeful selection literary materials and effective teaching methodology will create in the students the right spirit necessary for national development.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges above, it is recommended that:

- a. The National Commission for Colleges of Education should recommend texts for modules where texts for study are required. This will not only limit the rate of digression by the colleges but guide them in choosing texts whose thematic concern falls in line with the aims and aspirations of the society that fashioned the curriculum.
- b. Curriculum planners should design it in such a way that Literature training starts full from primary through the secondary schools thereby portraying it as a vital field of study. After all, literature is not a direct substitute to English Language in SSCE/NECO Examination requirement,
- c. Only candidates who study and passed Literature should be allowed admission into double major programme.

Conclusion

The study of Literature in Colleges of Education should be directed towards helping the students develop a commitment to their profession. Therefore, this paper observes that the rationale behind Teacher Education in Nigeria is not only to produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers but also to encourage further the spirit of inquiry and creativity in them. It is also to help them fit into the social life of the community and society at large and to enhance their commitment to national objectives. In addition, it is also to provide teachers with intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and to make them adaptable to any changing situation not only in the life of their country, but in wider world. The paper thus, notes that Literature in a social context is problem-solving and not merely meant to offer entertainment, temporary relief or escape from boredom.

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