Teaching Language and Literature as an Integrated Discipline in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract
In the Nigeria education system, the role of English is very vital as it is the language of instruction at all levels of education. Success in the English language as a subject in secondary schools in Nigeria has remained the deciding factor in education of the Nigerian child. The mastery of the language therefore, is not an option to the learners but a necessity. But despite the early exposure of learners to the learning of the language and the attention given to its learning by parents and the government, students in secondary schools in Nigeria still exhibit poor performance in the language at both internal and external examinations, resulting in their failure to secure admission into higher institutions. It is the opinion of the researcher that a practical and effective teaching strategy is needed to make the teaching and the learning of the English language more productive. Literature is then seen as a veritable tool for teaching English language; its three genres could be used to teach the English language successfully. For instance, features such as words and meanings, paragraphing, punctuation marks, sentence types and register that abound in novels are useful resources for teaching comprehension and essay writing. Drama could be used for teaching speech skills and poetry for teaching listening skills. This paper therefore advocates the integration of literature and English language as a discipline in secondary schools. This would enable students to use, on their own, those features of English they acquire in the novel for effective communication in English. The downward trend in the studying and reading of literature in secondary schools in Nigeria could be curtailed and reading culture would be revived.

Key words: Literature; Second language classroom; Integration; Teaching strategy; Effective communication

INTRODUCTION
The issue of English language in Nigerian educational system is very vital. It is the language of instruction in both secondary and tertiary institutions. It has also remained an essential, deciding factor in the education of the Nigerian child. A pass in English for instance, became a prerequisite to obtaining a certificate in all examinations. This explains why the mastery of the language is a necessity and not option to the Nigerian learners. According to Ajibowo English language in Nigerians education system is the: lamp which the learner (youths) need in order to travel the tunnel but because the lamp often proves to be beyond the reach of many Nigerian secondary school students, they are unable to travel far in their educational careers.

Considering the numerous and vital roles English plays and the secured anchor given it wherever it is spoken and its dominance in all areas which have made its use seemingly a sine quo non to the survival of individuals in Nigeria, it can be said that English has come to stay in a country like Nigeria where it occupies a very dominant position and enjoys prominence or what Ayotunde technically terms ‘dominance configuration’.

English, an erstwhile foreign language in Nigeria, is now a second language and it is fast becoming the first language of some children in the country (Ibrahim & Abdullahi, 2003). It is formally learnt in the classroom environment and informally in social environments and...
homes. English is needed for success in the educational process and in other areas of life. It is the language of upward mobility in Nigeria. Based on these roles of English, the Nigerian government has most often focused much attention on its learning. Also, many resources continued to be devoted to its teaching in Nigerian schools.

As their own complementary contribution and sensitivity to the importance of success in English, parents (literate and illiterate) take pride in sending their children to school to learn the English language not only as a means to an end but an end in itself (Adebanjo, 2008). For instance, proficiency in the use of English guarantees a breakthrough into global communication link and economy in Nigeria. Political, social and economic development can only be measured by the extent of the development of the language itself in Nigeria (Babatunde, 2008).

The mass failure of students in schools certificate examinations and failure to attain a credit pass in the subject therefore is a serious issue. It is more disturbing to note that majority of candidates for each year’s examination are those who have been repeating the examination over a period of time according to Adebanjo. Further still, students in tertiary institutions like polytechnics, universities and colleges of education are not allowed to graduate until they record a pass in the use of English course offered in their first year.

Success in the English language as a subject in secondary schools in Nigeria has also become a deciding factor in the pursuit of higher education. Yet students’ performance in it keeps dwindling as more failure than success is recorded in school certificate examinations yearly. Even the failure in other subjects according to Idowu Olajire is closely related to failure in the English language; that is, such failures are occasioned by poor mastery and performance in English. According to him, ‘until a child has mastered the language of instruction, he will learn very little’. This situation he says ‘reveals the close connection between communicative competence and educational performance generally’ because language is the most powerful tool of learning.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Despite the early exposure of learners to the learning of the language and the attention given to its study by both parents and the government, students in secondary schools in Nigeria still exhibit poor performance in the language at both internal and external examinations, resulting in their inability to secure admission into higher institutions.

In 2010, the NECO result released showed that out of the one million and one hundred candidates that wrote the exams, 834,000 failed English; that is not to say they did not fail other subjects. According to Yakubu and Ibrahim when the NECO Registrar, Professor Promise Okpala was summoned by the then Minister of Education Hon. Gbajah to explain what had befallen the country’s education standard, he said the failure did not start then. If the situation is this bad and yet certain level of proficiency in the English language is necessary for students’ educational advancement, it means continual effort must be made at finding means of improving the teaching and learning of the language.

The adduced reasons for this poor performance as opined by Ibrahim is either that the learners are not willing to acquire the necessary language skills or that there are some inadequacies associated with the language classroom. To remedy this anomaly, Ajibowo suggests more training in essay and summary writing, reading comprehension, grammatical structures, pronunciation, vocabulary development and proficiency in oral expression. In addition a practical and effective language teaching strategy is needed to enable the teacher to be more guided and focused so as to get learners motivated and make the teaching and learning of English more effective.

This is what informs the writing of this paper. Having been a one-time classroom teacher in secondary schools, teaching both English language and Literature as separate subjects for so many years, the researcher sees the need to suggest a more result-oriented teaching methodology for the teaching of English at the junior secondary school level. The researcher is therefore of the opinion that literature should be taught alongside language. This she believes will enhance language teaching and learning as teaching will be backed up with instructional materials such as literary works that will motivate learners to aspire to succeed while their needs are being identified and attended to.

1.1 Goals of Teaching English as a Second Language in Nigeria

Before any teacher can commence the teaching of any item in the syllabus, he/she must have identified aims that will serve as guide thus making him/her focused. One of the goals of teaching English is to teach the students the ability to understand without difficulty and speak English that satisfies the requirements of national and international intelligibility. Another goal is to teach learners the ability to express themselves clearly in flexible conversational English which forms an everyday acceptable pattern of communication and by extension helps students to interpret structures in the language. To help learners to increase their knowledge of the vocabulary, correct sounds and structures of the language they are learning forms another goal. To achieve these goals, Ocholi recommends the reading of literary works-Literature because the words a speaker uses in a language are stocked in Literature. What literature can be made to achieve in language teaching is what the remaining part of the paper emphasizes.

2. WHAT IS LITERATURE?

Literature has been defined by various scholars in different ways but only few are examined in this paper. One of these is provided by Afolayan that Literature is
a work of art expressed in words to mirror life and to be perceived intellectually to uplift the mind and soul. Another definition provided by Steinberg describes Literature as the mankind record expressed in verbal art forms of what it is like to be alive.

Literature can be expressed in three branches or divisions which are referred to as the genres of Literature; these are: prose, drama and poetry. The focus of this paper is not on the component of each genre but on the general relevance of Literature to the teaching and learning of English through the integration of the two in Nigerian secondary schools.

Literature is viewed as a vehicle for the attainment of reading and moral ethics among Nigerian students. In Aniko’s observation, Literature entails practical application of language and attempt to provide solutions to societal problems.

2.1 Goals of Teaching Literature
The task of teaching Literature in a second language situation is not an easy one. In a situation like this, therefore, there is a need for a firm orientation towards the needs of the second language learners. Literature is taught to expose learners to a wide range of suitable and interesting materials as a means of second language development. The need to improve learners’ spoken language and develop self confidence in speaking forms another reason for teaching Literature.

Literature is equally taught to satisfy examination requirements in literary studies, inculcating in learners through the zeal to read and the love for extensive pleasurable reading for its own sake.

Another goal is to expose learners to the different types or forms of Literature, oral and written as a means of appreciating the culture of their own people as well as of others. Furthermore, learners must be made to enjoy Literature as creative works of arts thereby developing their creative abilities.

2.2 Relationship between Language and Literature
Language and Literature according to Ishiyaku are bedfellows because Literature is a record of events and these events are recorded using language. Literature which Yakubu Attai says has a long time pedigree of mutuality is said to exist in language. This according to Menegbe does not translate to mean that Literature is of a low estate when compared to language According to him, ‘Literature is one of the blocks language uses to build itself and historifies the continuum of existence.’

Literature in Ocholi’s words provides the real ingredients that make language vivid, and accounts for emotive words such as metaphor, simile, paradox, oxymoron that serves as boost to the English language. Literature is further seen as the supporting pillar without which no language will function appropriately.

With this symbiotic relationship between language and literature, especially as literature is seen as strong instructional materials for the learning of language (Ibrahim & Abdullahi, 2003), it is the opinion of this researcher that the integration of the two subjects as a discipline at the secondary school level will help enhance the learning and the teaching of English language. This step, this researcher believes, will also help improve the reading culture of learners in secondary schools and by extension at tertiary institution since the secondary schools is the feeders of tertiary institutions.

2.3 Integrating Literature with Language as a Discipline
The English program is usually aimed at developing the four language skills- listening, reading, speaking and writing. Each of these skills makes use of sounds, structure and vocabulary. Although stated out separately, the skills are not to be treated in isolation since they are inter-related. For instance, all the areas of lexis and structure cannot be taught without making allusion to the four language skills. So, all these skills are essential for a proper understanding and the mastery of language.

The teaching of these skills can be enhanced when literature is taught alongside language. Though language cannot be tested using literature, literature can still be used to enhance the teaching and learning of English in secondary schools in Nigeria. For instance, writing, one of the two productive skills of language learning (writing and speaking) has been adjudged as the most sophisticated and most difficult of the learning skills even to first language learners. At the center of the poor performance of Nigerian students especially in English language in the senior secondary certificate examination, and the general fall in the standard of education at the tertiary institutions is the prevailing poor teaching and learning of the composition skills at secondary schools.

Though mastering the writing skills posts enormous challenges to learners of English as a second language, the problem is surmountable if the English language is taught alongside literature. Literature plays an important role in teaching and learning how to write compositions. Novels, for instance, are exemplifications of language system; the everyday language use for human communication. Both English and African novels with English as the language of expression, contain features of the English language used in England and Africa respectively. Features such as words and meaning, types of sentences, paragraphing, narrative, expository and descriptive passages, registers and punctuation marks that abound in the novels are useful resources for teaching composition.

From the recommended literary texts for instance, the teacher can bring out some extracts for the class and ask students to read and compose a short narrative essay or descriptive composition which are more suitable at the learner’s level. The teacher must stress that all terms of continuous prose are written in paragraph. A paragraph which happens to be a convenient unit of thought, discourse or composition enables the writer to develop a
unit of central idea at a time. Students can also be asked to summarize what the extract contains. This will help improve students’ performance in essay writing, paragraph development and punctuation marks.

Since the aim of teaching writing is to help learners to develop their skills of self-expression at sentence, paragraph and composition levels, the teachers should try to apply techniques that will provide a lot of exercises for the learners. This will enable learners to overcome spelling, concord, capitalization and preposition problems encountered in English words. The novel is a good resource for teaching all these aspects of the English language. This is why writing must be taught formally right from the primary level to the early part of secondary school.

The novel can also be used to teach reading especially when learners are exposed to a wide range of suitable and interesting novels. Reading novels aloud can serve as a means of second language development and the act can also be used to teach pronunciation. This practice can also help inculcate in the learners, the love for extensive reading. This, according to Opega will promote competence in the use of the second language since it will be used to illustrate and reinforce aspects of language use.

Many students lack confidence to communicate in English language with others or even participate in the class discussions because they do not trust their competence. Fear or lack of confidence does not allow some students to speak fluently thus, making most students perform poorly in both internal and external examinations. Plays are written to be read aloud. So, drama if properly taught can be used to improve learners’ spoken language and develop self-confidence in speaking. This can be achieved when students are exposed to play reading, role playing, acting, paying special attention to the relationship between stress and intonation on one hand and meaning on the other hand.

Drama as a branch of literary genre can be used to train students in speech and it can help to improve their language use. Those dramatic activities in drama for instance can help students see, remember, understand and get their language use improved. It can also be used to teach organization of ideas in writing and punctuation marks.

Another language skill that can be developed through literary materials is “listening”. For effective learning of the English language, the listening skill needs to be developed. This skill has for long been neglected in the teaching of language because of the illusion that it is an inborn ability which does not require any training or serious attention. Listening is essential to any communication transaction because it is not possible to produce satisfactorily what one has not heard. Oral fluency can be determined by the hearer’s ability to listen.

The failure of most students in examinations is attributable to the learners being poor listeners who are not smart enough to get the main message being delivered in the classroom. Since listening is a “teachable” and learnable skill according to Schmitts, it could be improved through reading literary works such as novels, drama and poems. In literary works, learners are taught how to concentrate while someone reads an excerpt or extract from a novel or a poem. Learners could be taught how to capture and evaluate information; that is, think along with the reader/speaker so as to be able to interpret the message or challenge any faulty reason in the message. Listening, as an everyday skill commonly used in all academic spheres, needs to be improved as a language skill.

3. SUGGESTED POINT OF INTEGRATION

This paper suggests that the junior secondary level should be the fruitful level at which the integration of the teaching of English language with the ingredients of literature in English be introduced. The children at this level are still amendable to changes and all positive habits inculcated to them will be retained and taken along to their senior secondary schools. If the integration in the teaching of English language and literature at the junior secondary school level is handled properly, literature is expected to provide a solid background to the study of English and this will enable the students to flourish in their learning of English at the senior secondary school considering the fact that some of them may not offer Literature in English as a subject.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the benefits to be derived from the integration approach, teachers are advised to encourage learners to read good, relevant, affordable and available texts.

Teachers should endeavour to motivate students with the use of these instructional materials by taking time to explain or summarize any recommended text to students.

Teacher should also help students to acquire the four language skills (Reading, speaking, writing and listening), especially the writing skill which is the most important in the educational setting in terms of utility.

Parents, on their own should try to buy recommended texts for their children and wards. They should also encourage their children and wards to make the best use of their time while at home.

Students on their part are advised to develop interest in reading as it is not just needed to pass exam. Reading literary texts could also aid understanding reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

If Literature is properly taught it can enlarge students’ insight to many things. It has been observed that students’ disinterest in reading has made many of them avoid studying.
Literature as a subject. This has caused a downward trend in the studying and reading of literary works.

The paper has examined the beneficial relationship between language and Literature and it concludes that the two should be integrated as a discipline at the junior secondary school level. This will make students extend the interest they have in passing English language to cover Literature. Consequently, Literature will be helping to facilitate language learning and in turn this will help revive the reading culture among students. Literature will enhance reading and reading will help in proper understanding of texts as learners will be able to pay close attention to the use of language and textual details.

Since there are no special literature teachers in secondary schools different from those teaching English language, it follows that a full integration of the two in the curriculum will not pose any problem in terms of personnel and students’ capacity to study the two together since they are inter-related. The integration will boost the study of literature while literature will enhance the study of the English language. For instance, it is the students’ knowledge of English words that aids their interest in literature while literature is used to illustrate and reinforce aspects of language use.

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