
Literature and English Language Teaching & Learning: A Symbiotic Relationship

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Abstract: *A close look at literature and language explains that the two are closely related. This close relationship is clear because from all indications, literature presupposes language. It is unthinkable to discuss literature without reference to language. However, going by the traditional practice at the secondary school level in Nigerian context, there are indications that Literature and English Language are treated as two separate school subjects. At the senior secondary school level, the subjects are taught in different classroom settings by teachers that are either designated Literature teachers or English teachers. By this dichotomy, the Literature teachers, to a large extent, pre- occupy their teaching period with the teaching of the stories, the contents and the socio-cultural, economic and religious implications of the arranged literary texts without placing much emphasis on the language components of the texts. In the end, some students have been found to have done very well in the Literature exams but perform poorly in English Language. Against this background, this paper posited that the relationship between literature and language is symbiotic. It was, so, suggested that the relationship should be explored and exploited so as to improve effective teaching and learning of Literature and English Language at the secondary school level in order that the learners would possess high level of proficiency in the use of English Language, which would ultimately contribute immensely in addressing the seeming poor academic performance at the secondary and tertiary levels of education.*

Keywords: Literature, Dichotomy, Teacher, School, Learning, Education.

1. Introduction: The most important role of English Language in the linguistic, educational, socio-economic and cultural settings is not in doubt. In the field of education in particular, English Language plays a main role. As the language for education and by extension the target language, the success or failure of formal education, to a large extent, depends on the level of competence of learners in English Language in schools and colleges. Unluckily, in contemporary time, “available evidence in the way our students use English in our schools and colleges shows that their English Language competence and English Language awareness leave much to be desired. Such as, it is common knowledge that a good number of secondary school leavers and tertiary institution graduates hardly express themselves fluently in both spoken and written English, and this anomaly has been found to be partly responsible for the poor academic performance threatening all levels of education.

As to what is typically responsible for the reduced performance in English language among students, myriad of reasons have been advanced by scholars. Such as, Ubahakwe identifies a couple of factors which among other things include the educational setting, the educational system, teachers’ status and motivation, the examination pattern, the learning environment, teacher preparation and language philosophy. Ayodele states that the causes of the abysmal performance in English Language must be traced to the classroom because “the formal classroom practices provide by far the greatest avenue for the learning of the language”. Babatunde identifies the classroom factors to

include: “teachers’ low level of competence in the language skills, particularly reading; unduly large classroom; too many periods per week; lack of incentive; and learners’ unserious attitude” among others. Another classroom factor threatening effective acquisition of English Language is the method of teaching Literature which separates it from English Language. By this process, Literature classroom is different from that of English Language. As a result, the resources of Literature, which have the potentialities of enhancing effective language learning, are denied the learners. This practice, undoubtedly, could be said to have inhibited effective teaching and learning of Literature and English Language in our schools and colleges.

In the light of the foregoing, the thrust of this paper is to establish the fact that there is a symbiotic relationship between literature and language; and further demonstrate how Literature could be integrated with English Language teaching and learning in an ESL setting for successful result.

2. The Concept and Functions of Literature:

The term “literature” is used basically in two different senses. Primary, it is used to refer to any written material on a subject. Next, it is a term used to refer to one of the school subjects studied by students or a university discipline; and it is this second sense that applies to us in this context. As a subject or discipline, Literature has been variously defined by different scholars. According to Onuekwusi, “Literature is one creative and beautiful creation in words whether oral or written, which explores man as he struggles to survive in his existential position and which provides entertainment, information, education and excitement to its audience”. Although the definition of Literature by Onuekwusi succinctly attempts to capture the essence of literature, it is relevant to point out that not all literature is creative. As a matter of fact, some literary works are factual, and it is based on this understanding that the prose genre

is classified into two, namely fiction and non-fiction. A good example of a popular non-fictional literary work is *Zambia Shall be Free* written by Kenneth Kaunda. However be that as it may, the basic element in Literature that is essential that can be presumed from the definition under reference is the fact that Literature, no matter the type or genre, is written in words. This is to say that language is the basic raw material with which literature is manufactured. It is based on this view that it is generally said that “Literature is language in practice”. That is to say that language theories, concepts and styles are put into function in the creation of literary texts. Consequently, if one must interpret and analysis a literary text, one must be competent in the language of the text and conversely if one must be competent in language, one should be sufficiently exposed to the literature of the language in question.

As a school subject, there are few important functions Literature performs. Put differently, the whole essence of developing Literature as a school subject is for the students to derive some benefits. Ayo explains the benefits as the common utilities of Literature. According to him, “the utilities of Literature could be educational, cultural, moral, recreational and socio-political. Literature helps to expand the learner’s linguistic presentation because it arouses their zeal and keeps in them an ever-ready inclination to read. Furthermore, it helps the learners to develop fluency and the ability to comprehend what is read”. Collie and Slater support the inclusion of Literature in the language classroom for the reason that it provides valuable authentic material, develops personal involvement and help contribute to readers’ cultural as well as language enrichment. Still on the utilities of Literature, Lazar provides five reasons for using literature in ELT to include: Motivating materials, Encouraging language acquisition, Expanding students’ language awareness, developing students’ interpretative abilities, educating the whole person.

Adding his voice to the utilities of Literature as a school subject, Unoh (1981) quoted in Ogunnaike (2002) posits that a high-quality literature can be an important aid to cultural assimilation or acculturation; language development and competence; conflict resolution; emotional development and stability; development of positive and good-oriented attitudes to life; a good liberal education, entertainment, relaxation and the sharing of vicarious experiences of positive value; the development of desired and desirable moral or other attributes; and as a consequence of all these, a stable and mature personality.

3. The Symbiotic Relationship between Literature and Language: Literature and language are not only intertwined but also inter-related. Literature pre-supposes language for the reason that it is with the instrument of language that Literature is concretized. Consequently, it sounds absurd to study Literature without language at the centre stage or to study language without Literature playing a prominent role. It is based on this view that the relationship between Literature and language is best described as symbiotic. The symbiotic relationship between Literature and language is summed up in the words of Wilmot.

A work of literature for all reading ages—is an organization of language to which linguistic awareness must be applied if it is to be understood and appreciated. In the process the pupil learns much of practical value both about language and in the use of language. In his literary studies he meets language in its most varied and powerful forms, and learns to examine the writer's use of it in the context of all the linguistic resources available to him. Therefore, literature demonstrates language at work. But it also helps the pupil to use language; it offers good models and stimulates linguistic responses of various kinds. English teachers not only present literature; they also exploit it, because it can generate language in addition to exemplify it.

Literature is rooted in language and language gets life through Literature. Therefore Literature and language are intimately interconnected. According to Lazar, Literature should be used with students because it is a motivating stimulus for language acquisition, students enjoy it, and it is a fun, it is found in many syllabuses and the like. Literature, a convenient foundation of content for a course in foreign language, provides motivating materials for language teaching.

Valdes opines that it is simply accepted as given that Literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level and that one of the most important functions of Literature is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written. As soon as we use Literature in language classroom, we are teaching language. Literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language.

Still on the relationship between Literature and language, Udor and Ubahakwe and quoting Brooks also say that English and Literature are interrelated and therefore support that the study of English Language and Literature should be integrated, in view of the fact that the latter is wholly and inevitably rooted in the former. They disagree that since there could be no dichotomy between a father and a son, As a result there is no sharp demarcation between language and Literature because Literature presupposes language. In the same vein, Ayo is of the opinion that “through the creative methods of teaching Literature, the students can be helped to develop confidence in them in producing coherent and cohesive spoken discourses and in organizing sentences into paragraphs with effective linkers and organizing

paragraphs into coherent and meaningful written discourse”.

Moreover, the study of Literature particularly increases the development of extensive reading skills. Research findings are overwhelmingly in support of the fact that there is correlation between extensive reading and language acquisition, especially effective writing. Such as, Wilkins posits that reading can provide a ready means for the acquisition of vocabulary and effective writing in a second language. The source further states that reading brings to the reach of the learner large repertoires of lexical items in their natural linguistic contexts. Wilkins’ argument that reading facilitates acquisition of vocabulary is very much strong because the hallmark of any effective writing is ability to use appropriate words to form meaningful sentences that are logically and sequentially linked. Therefore, all efforts to write would come to naught if the writer does not have a good command of the vocabulary of the target language. Guth and Schuster agree with the proponents of the reading-writing relationship theory by insisting that: “The good writer is a good reader”. Explaining the role of reading in the ability to write well, the source contends that:

In our writing, we draw first of all from our own experience. However, our personal experience is limited. Most of us have little chance of becoming world travel or explorers of spaces. Not everyone can become a recognized expert in some branch of science or a brilliant analyst of foreign affairs. To further throw more light to the reading-writing relationship, Guth and Schuster outlines three ways reading positively impacts on writing: Reading broadens the students’ familiarity with the resources of language, Reading provides information useful in their own and Reading enables students to compare their own experiences with those of others.

Phelps-Teraski, Phelps-Gunn, and Stetson (1983) while commenting on how reading activities relate to writing improvement contends that like speech, reading has an important place in language development, even with writing. According to the source, reading increases exposure to sentence construction, vocabulary, ideas and language fluency and also helps students develop their own idea as well as become familiar or fluent with semantic and syntactic structures. The source equally insists that reading can provide models of expression that the reader may like and wish to imitate.

Krashen liken the relationship between reading and writing to that between a mother and her baby. The sources posit that good writing is the by-product of vast and leisure reading and those good writers have done more reading for their own interests and pleasure than poor writers. The sources conclude that writing competence comes only from large amounts of self-motivated reading for pleasure and/or interest. Krashen’s argument is important in two respects. First, the author identifies extensive reading which literature hones as the mode of reading that actually influences writing. Second, Krashen made us to understand that it is large amounts of self motivated reading for pleasure that would give rise to the desired effect on writing.

Omojiuwa agrees that reading and writing skills are in fact closely related and could most often be regarded as one unified skill with reading acting as a stimulant for writing and vice versa. The author contends that people read in order to obtain information, develop vocabulary, make inferences, classify, observe, analyze, criticize, identify relationships, differentiate styles, draw conclusion and make generalizations.

Ayo argues that through prose teaching, the skills of intensive and extensive reading as well as skimming and scanning can be developed. According to Ayo, “if the students reading



efficiency is enhanced their writing skill will also be improved because to be a good writer one has to be a good reader. Ayo also contends that prose literature can be used to increase students' vocabulary and in this manner facilitate their writing ability; and the ability to have comprehensible discussion of the important parts of a novel can aid students' mastery of some basic forms of writing, for example, argument, description, narration and exposition.

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that reading, which is a characteristic feature of Literature, enhances language acquisition in general and effective writing in particular. But going by the abysmal poor performance of students in English at all levels of education in contemporary time, it would appear that the resources of Literature that facilitate language acquisition have not been fully harnessed, particularly at the secondary school level because of the current method of teaching Literature at that level. It is common knowledge that Literature at the secondary school level is taught as a separate subject different from English. Going by this technique, while some teachers are chosen Literature teachers others are classified as English teachers. By this arrangement, the business of Literature teachers is to strictly teach Literature without reference to the language components while English teachers do the same on the part of English Language without reference to literature. In all, there is no synergy or teaching cooperation between the two classes of teachers since every one of them is on their own. It is our thinking in this paper that this traditional method should be reviewed in order to pave way for an innovation that would create room for the exploration and exploitation of the symbiotic relationship between Literature and language in order to enhance proficiency in the use of English Language among learners of English as a second language.

4. Suggestions for Teaching Literature and English for Effective Result: In this section of the article, it is our intention to outline some suggestions for teaching Literature and English Language for effective result.

1) The Literature and the English Language teachers should be made to have a general goal of promoting efficiency in the use of English in their professional assignment. So as to achieve this goal, their professional training should be designed in such a way that they would be competent in both Literature and English Language so that the Literature teacher should possess all the basic skills necessary for teaching language while the English Language teacher should also be competent enough to teach Literature. The practice whereby teacher A claims he specializes in teaching Literature while teacher B is an expert in English Language should be de-emphasized. In the classroom setting, their teaching should complement each other's effort. The Literature teacher should not close his eyes to the language hints that abound in the prescribed literary texts while the language teacher should not hesitate to use excerpts from the prearranged literary texts to illustrate his teaching of various language components. By this approach, the success or failure of the learners in English Language in the classroom should be a collective responsibility of both the language and Literature teacher and not exclusively that of the language teacher as it is the case in the present time.

2) The importance attached to English language and Mathematics should be extended to Literature at the secondary school level. At the junior secondary school it should be taught and learnt as a fully-fledged subject and not a component of English language where it is given a scanty coverage. When taught as a separate subject at the junior secondary school level, there would be an ample opportunity for the learners to be exposed to several literary texts at that impressionistic stage, which would in turn

encourage the learners to cultivate the habit of reading extensively. At the senior secondary school level, Literature should be made a core subject as English and Mathematics and made compulsory for all students irrespective of one's area of inclination. This practice would enable all students passing through secondary school to benefit from the resources of Literature which are expected to enhance their ability in English.

3) A condition whereby students are required to read only the few literary books prescribed by the examination bodies for Literature does not create room for the students to imbibe the culture of extensive reading, which research findings have found to be one of the potent ways of addressing lack of proficiency in English. The students at both the junior and the senior secondary school should be made to read appreciable number of literary texts as it would create room for the learners to be immersed in the target language, which would in turn boost their proficiency in English.

4) The examination bodies should desist from the practice whereby language blemishes are not penalized in Literature exams. The practice whereby language mistakes are not put into consideration in assessing candidates in Literature exams vitiates the importance of Literature in the acquisition of language. The reason is that the teachers as in addition to the learners of Literature would be complacent about language component of Literature since they know that one can end up with an excellent grade in a Literature exam without being proficient in English language.

5) Literature should be allotted a reasonable number of periods on the school time table as in the case of English and Mathematics. The present practice whereby only two or three periods are assigned to literature per week is counterproductive. For one thing, it does not create an ample opportunity for the teacher to

treat the scheme exhaustively for the term or session; and on the part of the students, they do not have enough time for effective classroom work on the subject.

6) The prescribed literature texts should be within the linguistic competence of the students and be relevant to their educational and socio-cultural experiences. Although Shakespearean texts are classical and reflect the culture of the ancient English people, such texts cannot be useful for effective acquisition of modern English. Examination bodies and Literature teachers should prescribe texts that are rich in English culture written in modern English.

5. Conclusion: In this article, we have struggled to establish the truth that there is a symbiotic relationship between Literature and language. It is our opinion that if this relationship is well harnessed in the teaching and learning of Literature and English Language at the secondary school level. It is also expected that a high level of proficiency in English Language on the part of Nigerian students would be the needed panacea to the intractable problem of poor academic performance currently threatening the education industry. Therefore, the government, the curriculum designers, the school as well as the teachers of Literature and English Language should work hand in glove to ensure that this suggested innovation in the teaching of Literature and English Language in our schools and colleges is effectively implemented. As language teachers, keeping track of cultural developments, values and customs and also incorporating these with a plurality of rich classroom practices are hoped to renew and improve our teaching. The key principle is flexibility; teachers should avoid using the same exercises repeatedly in order to refrain from classroom routines.



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