

International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender  
Studies (LALIGENS), Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (2), Serial No 12, October, 2016: 60-70

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v5i2.6>

---

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING  
ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN  
SCHOOLS

UGOJI, STELLA CHINWE

Department of Languages

Federal Polytechnic, Oko

Anambra State, Nigeria

Tel.: +2348035645375

E-mail: [ugostella4amaris@yahoo.com](mailto:ugostella4amaris@yahoo.com)

---

ABSTRACT

The use of literature in the English language classroom has gained some grounds and is enjoying a number of revivals for a number of reasons. The role of literature in the English language classroom has been reassessed and many view literary texts as providing rich linguistic input, effective stimuli for students to express themselves, and a potential source of learner motivation. This paper therefore examined the use of literature as a commendable tool for teaching the English language. It also examined the concept of literature, language, the relationship between language and literature, the reasons for its teaching and learning in the English language classroom. Ways of overcoming the challenges, and approaches to using literature in teaching English language are also considered.

**Key Words:** English as a Second Language, literature in English

INTRODUCTION

The English language plays an important role in Nigerian language situation. English language evolved in Nigeria in a bid to dislodge the communication barrier

between the Nigerian natives and the English men. This led to the teaching of Basic English for communication, business transaction, missionary activities and other official functions. The evolution of the English language in Nigeria did not just end with dislodging the language barrier between the natives and the English men, but was also imperative for facilitating the cultural and linguistic problems in the multi-ethnic Nigeria. With time the English language became very important in many Nigerian activities. It is the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. This makes it a service subject across the entire school curriculum, as well as the language of examination, both internal and external. In Nigeria, English is the official language, the lingua franca, and a second language used for communication among multi-ethnic Nigerians in offices, courts, sophisticated commerce and national assembly.

Furthermore, English in Nigeria serves the purpose of international and global language thus being a link between Nigeria and other international communities. It is the dominating medium of communication in international conferences, meetings and other gatherings. However, Ayobanjo in Mmaduka (2007) pointed out the restrictive role of English thus:

The case for English has always been overstated. It is true that English in Nigeria is a common language, but only for the educated elites. Perhaps as many as 90 percent of our people in both the urban and rural areas are untouched by its communicative role (p. 100).

The important roles played by the English language in Nigeria have not forestalled the poor standard of written and spoken English among Nigerians (Nwodo (2011, p. 90); the use of English requires proficiency so that one functions well in the local and international societies. However, for the Nigerian learners of the English language to attain the expected proficiency expected in their use of the language, they need to be taught with appropriate, effective and efficient learning materials and methods. This is owing to the fact that the English language manifests characteristic features that are different from our indigenous languages. It therefore becomes pertinent for the English language teacher to explore other means and models of teaching the language such as using literature in English in the language classroom.

The Nigerian learner of English, according to Jegede (2005) needs to study literature in English, which exposes such learner to the varieties of usage because as he reads, he/she unconsciously learns and uses the language. He further stated that literature provides avenues for extensive, sustained and interesting reading, writing, listening and speaking. He finally stated that the study of literature in English affords learners the opportunity to be proficient in the language. Literature is the materials for English language and English language is a medium for writing literature. Extracts from prose, drama and poetry are used to teach comprehension, grammar and other language aspects (Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi 2009, pp.301-309). In recent times, the

importance of literature in the English language teaching has been gaining some grounds. This has also brought about serious debate among language experts on its importance in language teaching. Of course, many English language teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as something interesting and worthy of upholding. It is on this background that this paper tried to discuss among other issues, the importance of literature in the teaching of the English Language in Nigerian schools.

### THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE

Language is the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an index of identify which serves as a repository of a people's culture, industry and exploits. It is language that differentiates the homo-sapiens from other animals. The most effective of people's culture is their mother tongue (MT). Indigenous languages are treasures of culture and self-identity. In other words, language is the indicator of history and self-identification Solanke in Olaonye (2013, p.748). It is an indispensable cultural legacy with which all forms of human instructions are carried out. According to Nwadike in Olaonye (2013, p. 748), it is the key to the heart of the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth or affluence, thus bringing about national development.

Language is a catalyst in educational development which is an important index of national development. In order to achieve national cohesion and unity, Nigeria recognizes the importance of mother tongue education hence she states in her National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004, p. 8) that the language of instruction in the primary schools should be initially in the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Indigenous language is the most important tool with which society is organized, and it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thoughts and ideas. Modern man can hardly contemplate communal life without the instrument of language performance, especially spoken language, defines personality. For the teacher, his credibility is almost entirely anchored on his competence in communicating ideas, and stimulating learning through the use of language. Articulate and well-spoken teachers always invariably win the hearts and respect of their students. Language and language studies empower those who are engaged in them. Language as a means of communication is the corner stone of any educational process (Ige cited in Olaye 2013, p. 749). Language, whether spoken or written, is the vehicle through which knowledge is imparted, and knowledge is power.

### LITERATURE AND REASONS FOR ITS TEACHING AND LEARNING

The concept of literature has been viewed by different authorities. Literature as defined by Wikipedia refers to written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit. The Macmillan English Dictionary defines it as stories, plays

and poems, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not just entertainment. A broader explanation of literature according to Basnel and Mounfold in Lindsay (2012, p.1), is that literary texts are products that neglect different aspects of the society. They are cultural documents that neglect and offer deeper understanding of a country/countries. Literature in a most common term refers to works of the creative imagination, including works of poetry, drama, fiction and nonfiction. To Ezeifeke (2010, p.14), Literature is a verbal art that can manifest in either oral or written forms. As an art, he continues, it is a creation of the individuals in the society and the expression of the individual experiences in life. Literature as well treats themes that are the concern of sociology, psychology, economics, archeology, astronomy, physics and metaphysics.

Literary works are rooted in definite cultures and societies because of the need to express the human condition, thus addressing the problem of human as experienced by the author and also proffer solution on same. Literature therefore occupies central and enviable position as a cultural code. It is the key to the appreciation of all cultural practices. Literature studies the changes the society is going through by analyzing the variables responsible for such changes, thus making it a defender of change. Readers of literary works are introduced to new worlds of experience through the comedies and tragedies, poems, stories and plays. Meanings are also discovered in literature by looking at what the author says and how he/she say it. Through literature, we understand and make sense of the world around us, by exploring the human condition and analyzing how and why people think and feel the way they do. People also develop analytical open minds through literature. This is because readers see the world through the eyes of different writers from different cultures and at the same time learn the ways to deal with things happening around them. Literature is important because it speaks to us, it is universal and it affects us. It is beautiful. Literature is language in action since it satisfies human in all endeavours through the pleasure it gives with its beauty of form and style, edifies through moral and social commentary, relieves tensions, educates, entertains and informs.

A general look at the importance of literature brings us to reasons why it is necessary in the classroom. Literature is seen as authentic materials that are capable of exposing learners to the source of unmodified language in the classroom, since the skills they acquire from the language of literature can be useful to them outside the classroom. Literature, which is often rich in multiple layers of meaning can be effectively used for discussions and sharing of feelings or ideas encourages interaction, and so on. Literature is an art of communication both within and outside the classroom by paying attention to formal structures to ensure that its language is more marked and more deserving of attention than the language of other communication.

Lazar, (1993) in Lindsay (2012, p.1), stated that literature expands the language awareness of its readers through the examination of sophisticated language

used in the literary texts. In reading literary texts learners are exposed to the values in those texts which related to the world outside the classroom. Literature, through this means therefore educates the whole person. Literature serves as a motivator to its learners. The fact being that the high status literature holds in many cultures and countries makes students feel a real sense of achievement when they understand a piece of highly respected literature, especially such that has awarded its writer noble prizes. Literature aims at liberating humans in general. Without literature we lack insight and understanding of the human nature. Everyone should therefore study it!

A tripartite relationship between or among languages, literature and culture (whether foreign or indigenous) has been well established and documented (Olaoye 2013, p. 749). According to him, there is no literature without language. Culture and language too are inseparable and the trios are intricately interwoven. They play vital role in man's education and national development. Literature is an art which entertains and instructs. It warns people of danger, and instructs by opening people's eyes to a wide range of experiences and a deeper understanding of these experiences. According to Fatokun cited in Olaoye (2013, p. 749) Literature presents situations, interactions and oppositions. It suggests a wide range of values and attitudes.

To understand an ethnic group and their culture one may have to turn to their oral and written narratives, their drama, and poetry. A good piece of literature can be regarded as an authentic mirror image of its society and time. Through satire, proverbs and symbolism, literary artists communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings about social ills in the society which they criticize with prussic diction. Proverbs, for instance, are a lesson in prudence, generosity, patience and wisdom all of which are indispensable to the guidance of mankind and the stability of the society. Literary artists use languages to ridicule or condemn anti-social behaviours such as corruption, assassination, political thuggery, religious intolerance, oppressive rule or dictatorship, any form of human degradation and undemocratic practices.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The relationship between language and literature has remained a nagging subject of discourse. Separation of language from literature could be likened to an attempt to separate form from its content, or container from its content. Language is the form or the container, while literary message and creativity are the contents. Therefore, rather than seeing one as separate from the other, they should be studied in complimentary relationship (Chukwu & Okeke 2013, p. 43). The complementarity in language and literature can best be appreciated where a literary work is studied as a medium through which a writer lets out his creative impulse. To a literary writer, language is a means of communicating perceptions, emotions, ideas and feelings that exist in various shapes and manners. Literary writers see themselves as active and not positive members of their society. They observe, feel, recreate and comment on the

happenings in their society. These are part of their social and artistic responsibilities. In doing these, language remains their potent tool. Therefore, every literary work is a context of social interaction between the writer and his or her reader(s). The writer struggles with words and meaning in order to communicate the right vision. The language aspect of literature is very important because it hides the art and vision of a work as Willmott in Chukwu and Okeke (2013) describes it:

There are reasons why we teach literature edifies or entertains the pupils, its study confronts him with language and the need to elucidate its meaning...in literary studies, he meets language in its most varied and powerful forms and learns to examine a writer's use of language in the context of all the linguistic resources available to him. Thus literature demonstrates language at work (p. 44).

Literature is therefore, a discipline of study as well as a potent tool for the teaching of language in use. Again when a literary work is recommended for freshmen in the university, the prime interest of the teacher is to use the text as a language teaching tool to illustrate the language rules and how they respond to actual use in context. It is a tool for learning extensive reading, meaning extendibility in words, complexities in syntax, creative manipulation of phonemes and so on. In this regard, the social vision of the writing becomes secondary; but not discarded.

It is difficult to talk about language in use without discussing the purpose; neither can we talk about the purpose without talking about the medium that conveys the purpose. Language is so dependent on context. It may, therefore, be unrewarding to restrict language and literature teaching to sacrosanct rules. The influence and input of contexts are practically provided in literary writings. On the other hand, a literary scholar who is interested in the vision and or art of the writer can rely on the linguistic clues through foregrounding and prominence. Foregrounding and prominence come in the form of both conformity and deviation from the linguistic rules. Disruption at any of the linguistic levels, lexical, syntactic arrangement, phonological patterning and semantic field helps a writer to communicate indirectly.

#### LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The role of literature in English Language teaching programmes was not streamlined initially. In recent times, literature in second language classrooms has a very important linguistic input for students. It is a valuable source of motivation for learners. Teaching literature as a model for teaching the basic language skills or reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language areas of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, is important for proper learning of the English language as a second language.

Using literature as a tool for English Language teaching and learning has opened up new paths and opportunities for the language teacher and students.

Language teaching is a process whose aim changes not only from country to country, but from culture to culture. The place of literature in the English language classroom has become the fashionable phenomena. Macalabe in Michael (2010) state that to truly know a language, you must know something of the literature of a language. It is on this premise that we discuss reasons why literature should be used in the teaching of English as a second language.

Literature is intellectually stimulating because a book allows a reader to imagine words they are not familiar with another by using descriptive language. For the reader to understand, he will create a vision of what the writer is saying, thus making the reader a performer or an actor in a communication event. Collie and Slater (1990, p.3), and Dario (2010, p.1-3) stated that literature provides valuable authentic materials, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement among others. These they say, can be achieved only if the teachers use relevant and appealing materials to teach learners through the use of activities that promote involvement, reader response and a solid integration between language and literature.

Literature involves a special or unusual use of language. The linguistic features of literary texts such as metaphor, simile, assonance, alliteration, repletion of double or multiple meaning of a word, poeticisms and mixing style and registers according to Hall (2005, p.47-57) all combine to form a highly unified and consistent effect which strongly reinforces the message of the text. On the other hand, literature such as novel, a division of prose, when used in the teaching of the English Language provides a more involving motivational source for pedagogical activities and it also engages learners intellectually, emotionally and linguistically. Reading novels also enhances meaning making processes and language capacity in our learners.

Literature provides an additional way in which the learner of English as a second language is exposed to the elasticity of the language, and thus a means of reinforcing language skills. Adebayo (2000, p.23), in his own view opines that literary classics can be employed to teach both the structural or formal aspects (such as syntax, morphology, lexis and spelling), and the functional skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing within meaningful situational and cultural contexts. Jegede in Nwodo (2011, p.91), sees the Nigerian learner of the English language as having a need to study Literature in English since it exposes such learner to the varieties of usage as he/she reads, he/she unconsciously learns and uses the language. Literature, he continues provides avenues for extensive, sustained, and interesting reading, writing, listening and speaking. To Jegede, literature is more than a resources used to develop literacy skills. It occupies a central place in reading curriculum, and helps emerging and developing readers exercise, their skills, strategies and interest. He finally contends that the study of literature in English helps learners to be proficient in English language.

Literary texts are representational in their language by involving the learners and engaging their emotions, as well as their cognitive faculties. Such texts expose students to complex themes and fresh unexpected uses of language. Students acquire a great deal of new language through the plot and characters of an authentic novel or short story. Using literature in the English language classroom also helps students to become more sensitive to some of the overall features of the English Language. Literature is life itself and everything about life. "There is no life without literature" (Anibueze, Achufusi, Madukwe, & Iloama, 2015, p. 156). Students' comprehension and interpretation abilities are developed through reading literary texts that are often rich in multiple level of meaning. The use of literature in the English language classroom does not end with the linguistic benefits rather it educates the whole person. This it does by stimulating the imagination of our students, to develop their critical activities and to increase their emotional awareness. Literary works such as novels, plays and poems facilitate understanding of how communication takes place in a country. Literature adds a lot to the cultural grammar of the learners. It provides learners with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. Literature helps students become familiar with many features of written language, as well as read a substantial and contextualized body of text. Students learn about syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills.

The use of literary texts in the teaching and learning of English as a second language is an important approach to language teaching since it helps learners in the development and learning of the language skills. These importance notwithstanding, some challenges are inherent in using literature in the English classroom.

#### OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF USING LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Teachers and learners encounter some difficulties in using literature in the English language classroom. These challenges include, text selection, length of the text, language of the texts, cultural difficulties and cultural appropriateness among others.

Maley (2001, p.1) advocated that literary texts to be used for the teaching of English language should have relevance and interest to learners as well as be appropriate to the level of the students' comprehension. He further advocated that shorter texts may be easier to use within the available time in the class, though longer texts provide more contextual details and development of character and plot. In terms of culture, so culturally dense texts should not be used so as to allow outsiders understand essential meaning. Learners should as well not be offended by textual content.

Other approaches to overcoming the challenges of using literature in the English classroom as stated by Adebayo (2000, p.24) include;

- i.. A language based approach which helps students to integrate the language and literature syllabus more closely by studying the language of the literary text.
- ii. Literature as content that is, making literature the content of the course, through its history and characteristic of literary movement, the social, political and historical background to a text, literary genres and rhetorical devices etc.
- iii. Making literature a means of personal enrichment. This simply means that students in reading literature reflect on their personal experiences, opinions and feelings, and so while learning English, they become more active, both intellectually and emotionally, and
- iv. Stylistics in the classroom, which enables students make meaningful interpretation of the text itself, as well as expand their knowledge and awareness of the language in general.

The teacher of the English language in using literary texts should apply also the techniques of analyzing the text, comparison and contrast of two topic-related texts, expansion of the text by the students, matching two groups of items with regards to syntax and meaning, medium transfer, that is, transferring the text from one medium to another, such as, from oral to written, or from prose to poetry, reconstruction of some elements in the text, reduction of the text without losing the meaning, replacement of some elements of the text with another. Others are pre-reading tasks, interactive work on the text, and follow up activities (Adebayo 2000, & Esther 2012).

#### CONCLUSION

Literature plays an important role in teaching the four basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The use of literary texts in language teaching will help teachers acquaint themselves with the language use, develop their own competence and understand language as a social phenomenon and not as an exclusive branch of learning. It will also transform the classrooms as the stage in which there is real practice of communicative language. Learner's intellectual ability will be developed while they are exposed to variety of linguistic and literary expressions and communicative functions of language. Literature from every ramification cannot be excluded from the study of the English language since literature is language and language is the raw materials for literature. This paper has advocated that the syllabus should be directed towards providing unified course which will accomplish the most effective way to study the English Language, through the medium of its literature.

### References

- Adebayo, L. (2000). Values and limitations of using literary texts for teaching *ESL Journal of Education. University of Illorin.*
- Anibueze, I, Achufusi, A. Maduekwe, U. & Iloama, C. (2015). *Principles of functional communication in English language skill iv.* Enugu: Glanic ventures.
- Chukwu, U & Okeke, F. (2013). Language in literature and literature in language: Synergy for effective study of English as a second language in *Journal of English Language Teachers' Association of Nigeria. Jeltan Vol.3. 43-53.*
- Collie, J. & Slater (1990). *Literature in the language classroom: A resource book of ideas and activities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University, Press.
- Dario, B. (2010). *Teaching English: The role of literature in English language teaching.* Partone: London British Council.
- Esther, L. (2012). Classic literature newsletter. about.com. The New York Times Company.
- Ezifeka, (2010). Literature and national development. *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association (JNESA) 14:1.* Lagos.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy on education.* Yaba: NERDC Press.
- Hall, G. (2005). *Literature in language education.* New York: Palgrave.
- Lindsay, C. (2012). *Teaching material: Using literature in the EFL/ESL classroom.* [www.onestopenglish.com/support/meth](http://www.onestopenglish.com/support/meth)
- Macmillan English Dictionaries. [www.macmillandictionary.com](http://www.macmillandictionary.com)
- Maduka, C. (2007). The cloud is thickening: Nigerian languages and literature in national development. *In language and literature in a developing country essays in honor of professor Benson O.A Oluikpe.*
- Maley (2001). Literature in the language classroom in the *Cambridge Guide to teaching ESOL.* Cambridge University Press.
- Nwodo, E. (2011). Deprivation of literature in English as a missing link in Nigerian education in the 21st century: Issues and Prospects. *Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association (JNSA).* Lagos 14:2
- Okwara, M. Shiundu, J. & Indoshi, F. (2009). Towards a model of integrated English language curriculum for secondary school in Kenya in *Education Research and Review, Academic Journals 4:5*

Olaoye, A. (2013). Towards vision 20-2020: The role of language and literature in national development. *In theory and practice in language studies, vol.3 No.5, pp.748-753.also[atdoi:10.4304/tpls.3.5.748-753.*

Wikipedia the free Encyclopedia (2010). Literature  
<http://en/Wikipedia.org/wiki/literature>