

## The Place of Literature in the Teaching of English Language as a Second Language

S.O. Labo-Popoola  
General Studies Unit, Fountain University, Osogbo, Nigeria

**Abstract:** From the inception of human history, language, defined as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which are used by the people of a particular country or area, remains a fundamental and common heritage of human society. It is, this language heritage that distinguishes human species from other living species. With the use of language for instance, human species have been able to make inventions, communicate ideas and spread such inventions and ideas from generation to generation. As important as this human heritage is, it is a coat of many colours in many societies. In other words, within a language group, there could be much dialectical diversity. Therefore, there is hardly a nation or society, where just only one language is spoken. Instead, different languages, separate human societies and the human beings therein from one another. This does make it difficult for people belonging to different language groups to understand one another. Because of this, a second language that would unify all the people of different language groups is therefore necessary if people, who speak different languages must have a common understanding of ideas and have meaningful interactions in their day to day activities. Given the fact that second language is not one's language, it has to be taught and learnt. The objective of this study therefore is to examine the place of literature in the teaching and learning processes of a second language.

**Key words:** Literature, second language, English, teaching, learning

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### INTRODUCTION

Language in any human society, is an important human heritage. The significance of language in human life cannot be over-emphasized. It is indeed central not only to our social interactions and relationships, but also in distinguishing us and enabling others to ascertain the position in the society. This would explain why people with speech or hearing disabilities find it difficult to integrate and participate fully in their communities. What this means is that every language community has developed unique modes of using its language. At the same time, each language has been moulded in a special way to serve the needs of the community that speaks it. In this way, every language is a unique system and therefore, a resource for humankind. It is because of the many unique systems in each language that we talk of linguistic diversity. This linguistic diversity, like biodiversity, is an important feature of our universe. The many languages spoken by the various world populations signify the communication problems, which human societies are likely to face in their day to day interactions.

Generally, all languages are unique in some senses because languages, the world over, are not only significant to the personal and social well-being of their speakers, but they are also valuable as a resource and constitute an invaluable heritage for humanity. This is because each human language has a unique linguistic

inventory and rules, reflects its own cultural experience, expresses its own world view and manifests its own artistic peculiarities. Thus, taken together, all the many world languages have an enormous wealth of linguistic, cultural, world view and artistic phenomena to offer mankind. The complexity of human languages, has many implications for the scholastic understanding of a language that is foreign to us.

Today, as a result of globalization, there has been an increasing need to interact at both official and unofficial levels. In particular, nationals of different countries have to move from one geographical region to another, needing a language of communication. In this case, some languages such as English Language, French, Spanish, German and Arabic have become what can be described as second language in many communities of the world. In other words, they have become the language of communication, interaction and relationship. For this reason, these languages mentioned above, need to be learnt if we must develop along with others.

In Nigeria, English language has been accepted as the official language since colonial rule. In spite of this long history of English language as an official language, many Nigerians do not still communicate in the language except during official engagement. The reason for this is because English language is not the first language of Nigerians. In Nigeria, English Language exists in relation to some major national languages such as Hausa, Igbo,

Yoruba and many others, which total about 400 languages. In a circumstance like this and being a former British colony, English language has naturally become a means of communicating ideas and information at both official and unofficial levels. It serves a very important means of establishing and maintaining unifying relationship with other people of diverse cultures and mother tongues. This may explain why Kehinde (2004) observed that English language has a centrifugal force in Nigerian societies. It pulls together people of diverse origins speaking different language.

Over the year, English language in Nigeria has become diversified with emergence of some native versions such as the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and the Nigerian Standard English, which are spoken alongside the local languages and national languages. With this development, it has been possible for many Nigerians to code-switch and code-mix in their day to day interactions. It is important to note that the choice of any of these varieties as a means of communication depends on the educational level of the actors in the social interactions. In spite of the existence of these varieties, the English language as handed down by the colonial masters, still remains the official language of communication, interaction and relationship in Nigeria. It is also the only one that is recognized as a subject to be taught in the Nigerian educational system.

Consequent upon the above, English Language is taught at almost all levels of educational system in the country and therefore, is introduced to students right from the pre-primary to the tertiary level. English language thus becomes a major criterion for admission into tertiary institutions and a compulsory subject that must be taken in the University Matriculation Examination conducted by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board as every candidate that sits for the examination must compulsorily take use of English as a paper, along with three other subjects. English language being a second language in Nigeria, must therefore be learnt. Learning and comprehension of any language involves proper understanding of the people's culture, which can only be facilitated through numerous literature about the people. Learning of foreign language like English is therefore, impossible without an adequate understanding of the study about the people. It is in this context that this study theoretically examines the place of literature in the teaching and understanding of English as a second language. In order to achieve this objective, the remaining part of this study is organized to consist of conceptual issues, an overview of the problems of learning of English language in Nigeria, relationship between language and literature, benefits of using literature to teach language any language.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Conceptual issues:** The two concepts, which form the focal point of this paper, are the concept of language and literature. According to The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007), language generally is defined as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area. There are different types of languages, which include body language, second language, first language, modern language, etc. In this research, the focus is on the second language, which is also defined as a language that one speaks in addition to the language one learned as a child (one's native language). On the other hand, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007) also gives three different meanings to the word, literature. The first meaning sees literature as books, poems, plays, etc. that people think are important and good. Secondly, literature in another sense is seen as books, articles, etc. on a particular subject. Thirdly, literature may be defined as printed information produced by people, who want to sell or say something. From the three components of what literature is all about, it may be seen as any written text, which according to Onukaogu (1999) is categorized into four, namely fiction, fact, content area text and newsreel. Fiction consists of poetry, prose and drama. Many of the books by African and Nigerian authors fit into this group. Fiction is needed by language learners to enhance their imaginative ability and creativity as they read the language, they want to learn in the curriculum. Fact is informational text, carefully written to inform non-experts. Such texts include historical accounts of past national events, where statistics dates of events are stated. Content Area Text denotes a type of written text, where the author writes for the would be experts. Here, the texts are designed to enhance the knowledge base of the language learner in the subject area. Finally, Newsreel are published or written texts to entertain and to pass on current news items to the reader. Examples of newsreels are newspapers, magazines, newsletter, etc. Onukaogu (2002) therefore, opined that all the four types of texts are needed in order to make English language curriculum result and goal-oriented.

Literature has however, been seen by literary experts and writers from different perspectives. For instance, Pearse defines literature as written or oral composition deriving from and mirroring a society and the historical experiences of the society and its people. Corbin (1996) sees it as an experience and imagination. Some other researchers see it as a body of written texts produced by a culture and highly valued within that culture over a period of time as part of its literary heritage (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). Hence, in offering English

literature as a subject, works of writers such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, etc. become the fundamentals in the understanding of English language as a second language as such literatures clearly represent the cultural heritage of the people, whose language we want to learn as a second language.

Thus, treatment/reading of these texts is considered as an important part of the English culture. This has therefore, informed the choice of texts of literature in the learning of English language. Thus, going through the curriculum of the subject, Literature in English, there exists a blend of texts from both foreign and national researchers.

**Problems of learning english language as a second language in Nigeria:** As noted earlier in this research, English language, is a foreign language in the Nigerian Society and therefore, needs to be included in the curriculum of all levels of education primary, secondary and tertiary institutions if it must understood as a second language. In spite of its introduction at various levels of education, learning of English Language has remained a teething task at all educational levels. In particular, the English language competence of the Nigerian secondary school students has been on a steady decline since 1960 (Onukaogu, 2002).

Many other researchers such as Afolayan (1984) and Omodiaogbe (1992), as well as West African Examination Council (WAEC) have observed that the performance of students in English language has been very poor. A similar trend of decline in English language proficiency among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria has also been noted by researchers such as Oguntuase (1990), Obemeata (1995) and Odejide (2000), who have observed that there is deficiency in communication in English language. What all this means is that although, English language has been taught as a subject and of course, as a second language in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria, students have not really shown competence in its use. The way students use English language in schools and colleges shows that their awareness and competence in the language leave much to be desired.

It is imperative to note that proficiency or otherwise of students in English Language usually affects their performance in other subjects in the curriculum. Jones (1970) believed that education failure was often language failure, especially in the second language situation, in which Nigeria finds herself. Literature has shown that a positive correlation exists between students' abilities in English language and their abilities in other subjects. Oladoyin (2006) discovered that students, who did well in English language performed better in other subjects. This

invariably means that if a student is good in English language, he should be good in all other subjects. This is only logical as all other subjects are taught and examined in English language.

Various factors have been deduced for poor performance of students in English Language. However, Onukaogu (2002) classified these factors into four groups. These are absence of a vigorous and robust language policy that should inform the totality of the English Language curriculum; inadequate materials for the teaching of English; English language teachers do not have relevant educational qualifications and experience to teach the subject and English Language curriculum is separated from the curriculum of literature in English.

**Language and literature: Two sides of a coin:** If the purpose of learning a language is communication and literature is communication, then the two are two sides of a coin, which are not separable (Adesuyi, 1991). The two aspects i.e., language and literature are used by people in everyday activities. When people speak, read novels, newspapers, etc., language is being used to express their thoughts and experiences. As mentioned earlier, The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007) defines language as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which are used by the people of a particular country or area. This definition shows that the language of a people reflects their peculiarity as a country or area or society, which is reflected in their customs, culture, beliefs, traditions, norms and expectations. All these are usually expressed in the literature texts, especially in the fiction. The interpretation of this is that language does not develop in a vacuum and therefore, is part of the culture of a people and the chief means by which the members of a society communicate. A language therefore, is both a component of culture and a central network through which other components are expressed (Lado, 1964).

From the foregoing, it can be seen that these two subjects-English Language and Literature-in-English are related. The general belief here is that the knowledge of literature prepares the foundation for language learning. Apart from entertainment, literature enhances students' general use of language since communication takes place all the time in Literature. Literature helps learners develop their understanding of other cultures, make them aware of the differences in cultures as well as enable them tolerate and understand other peoples' cultures. Through literature, universal themes such as love, war, loss, etc. that are not always covered in the language course books are treated. Through literature, the learner achieves the following: cultural assimilation or acculturation; language

development and competence; conflict resolution; a good liberal education and development of desired and desirable attributes. There is no doubt that a learner/student exposed to all the virtues listed above shall be fully integrated into his culture as well as other people's culture. He should also be fluent in language, having a very wide range of vocabulary at his disposal. From the above, it can be seen that literature has become an important window through which we can reach the stage of fluency in English Language and of course any language.

Realizing the importance of literature, as quoted in Ogunnaike (2002) opined that the two subjects should be integrated since they are inter-related. This perhaps led to the decision of policymakers in education to merge the two subjects at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. Thus, the National Curriculum for English Language in the Junior Secondary School has fused the two subjects into one subject named English Studies.

The implication of this is that the English Language teachers in the JSS are now saddled with the responsibility of teaching the new subject (English Studies), which consists of English language and Literature in English. However, this new arrangement is rocked with a number of problems. First and foremost, because there is no specific period allocated to Literature in English on the school's general time-table, the teachers are faced with the problem of balancing the time allocation for the two aspects of the new subject at the junior secondary school level. Secondly, deriving from the first problem, teachers at this level of education, do not normally give enough attention to the literature aspect of the subject in the class as many of them do not even know the rationale for merging the two subjects.

At the Senior Secondary School (SSS) level, Literature-in-English is treated as a separate subject. That is while, English language is made a general subject for all students at this level of education, Literature-in-English is restricted to only Art students, in which case, the Science students are usually made to opt for Geography. To ensure that no student in science class offers Literature-in-English, Geography is made compulsory and it is taken, when Literature-in-English is taken by the Art Students.

This arrangement at the Senior Secondary School level is impacting negatively on the understanding of English Language. This points to the fact that Literature-in-English and English language are twin subjects, which if taught together, would enhance understanding of other subjects and would also widen the scope of reasoning of students in their world view.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Literature and teaching of english language: prospects and challenges:** As shown in this study, language is an instrument of communication, which makes it possible for two or more persons to establish and sustain a relationship, while literature is a means of communication through which peoples' culture is transmitted from generation to generation. That is, literature represents a written text about a culture over a period of time, which is preserved as literary heritage. The close connection between literature (cultural heritage) and language is obvious from the fact that the former is usually written in a language. Thus, because of this close link, there is no way the peoples' culture (literature) can be separated from the language. From the foregoing, it can be seen that literature, being an aspect of language, is an important factor in the teaching and understanding of language. However, in today's world, language learners see language as a set of transactions, which is different from literature. This belief has precluded learners from seeing language as part of literature. The implication of this is that learning of language as an enterprise is now seen as an uphill task because the literature, which is supposed to provide the rudiments of language, is given secondary role and recognition, which indeed is affecting the proficiency of learners in oral and written aspects of language.

In the light of the above, one can say that literature is language put to use and therefore, should be used in teaching language. What this means is that using literature to teach language will definitely attract some benefits for both the learner and the teacher. The use of literature often promotes motivation in the classroom. Through literature, learner's sense of involvement is developed as the affective domain of the learner is strengthened. This domain of the educational development of the learner cannot be taken care of in the English Language course books except in the three genres of literature namely, prose, poetry and drama. According to Mcrae (1991), this emotional involvement also gives the learners the pleasure of using the language imaginatively by making the learner to free towards the target language, which is English Language in the context of this study.

Another benefit from literature is exposing the learner to the culture of the native speakers of the language. Since, literary texts often reflect practices, culture, attitudes and beliefs of the native speakers of the language, the learner has no option other than assimilating the culture. Literature in this context enables the students to develop their own perceptions as to how people of different cultures relate to their experiences and assess them. Such perceptions help students to see the

core of human situations that can occur cross-culturally. Through literature, beauty and splendor of nature are enjoyed by the student (reader) as experiences that are not possible in real life situations are gone through imaginarily (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). For example, going through stories filled with images of love, adventure, war, etc., creates an outlet for emotion. This therefore, leads to sharper and deeper real life experiences. These imaginary situations enable the reader (learner) to identify with others and their experiences. It also enlarges the student's knowledge of the world. The opportunity so created by the use of literature makes the learner to understand that human nature is multi-dimensional. Literature is of immense help in language learning through extensive reading skills. Reading is the easiest way of bringing the foreign learner into sustained contact with a substantial body of the language. If the piece read is interesting, the language remains in the mind of the reader. The patterns of collocative and idioms are established. Extensive reading widens the horizon of the reader in terms of vocabulary and usage, which invariably promotes the thoughts. There is no doubt that poor development of vocabulary and language skills has seriously inhibited development of excellence in literary studies. It is necessary to point out here that the benefits that could be derived from using literature in a language class should not be limited to the English class. The benefits are achievable in the teaching of other languages such as Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa in the Nigerian context. For instance, a student with Yoruba background studying Igbo language shall benefit a lot by being exposed to Igbo literature. This will no doubt make the Yoruba learner to be culturally assimilated into the Igbo culture.

Despite the benefits that could be derived from using literature to teach language, there could be problems if certain precautions are not taken. Some students find literature very difficult because of the choice of literary texts. If difficult authors are chosen, students will not enjoy reading their works. As Rosenkjar (2007) puts it, the students will rely on word-for-word translation, which is not the way to develop language skills or literary appreciation in students. Therefore, literary texts have to be chosen in such a way that they would capture the interest of the reader (learner). The texts should lead the students to discover language features. They should be chosen to serve as a springboard for creative communicative post-reading activities.

Another problem could be the teaching strategies adopted by the teacher. The manner in which the teacher handles the literature class goes a long way in giving the students the right attitude towards the subject. Ogunnaike (2002) observed that there is no specific

method in teaching literature hence, the teacher uses whatever approach/method available to him. The attitude of the teacher as well as his competence in handling the text will determine his output in the class. The teacher, in using literature in his language class, should relate the class activities to real life situations. The class should be made to be lively, interesting and attractive. The teacher should ensure that the students' background and culture are taken into consideration, when choosing literary texts. Since literature is language in action, there should be actual reading in the class. Though, extensive reading should be encouraged, which is mainly reading out of interest, intensive reading is required of the students in order to ensure that they understand the text.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has looked at language as an important human heritage and its uniqueness as being significant to the personal and social well-being of the speakers of the language. English language, as the official and second language in Nigeria, is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of educational system. Because, it has been established that a very high percentage of students perform poorly in the subject, the study attempted to examine the place of literature in the teaching of English as a second language, which till today constitutes a problematic subject area in most of the schools in Nigeria. The study specifically examined how literature can be used in the teaching of language in order to bring out better performance in the students.

Thus, the study did by looking closely at the relationship between literature and language. The study observed from the review of past researches in this area that language and literature are closely related and that language is the medium through, which culture, beliefs and traditions of a particular people (literature) are expressed or passed from one generation to another. Benefits of using literature to teach language, especially a second language were also highlighted. Some of these benefits include cultural assimilation, extensive reading (which widens the horizon of the reader) and development of the affective domain of the student.

As important as the use of literature is in the teaching of language (English language) the study identified some problems, which could make nonsense of literature as effective tool for teaching English language.

Conclusively, the study observed that using literature to teach language should not be limited to English language as this method can also be made use of in other language classes such as Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba in the Nigerian context.

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