ISSN: 1597-5037

USING LANGUAGE TO TEACH LITERATURE TO STUDENTS IN BOTH SECONDARY AND TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

SALAHUDEEN MUSBAHU[1], ABUBAKAR YUSUF[2], MUHAMMAD MUHAMMAD GISHIWA[3]
Department of English, School of Secondary Education (Languages), Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashu'a, Yobe State. Nigeria.

Corresponding Author:
E-Mail: salahudeenmusbahu@gmail.com
Phone No.: +2347039495705

Abstract

Despite the fact that Literature is rooted in Language, and Language gets life through Literature, this study is not intended to further justify the linguists' argument that linguistics is a veritable tool that can be employed for text interpretation or analysis. As a matter of fact, we have got a deluge of such works/studies already. In this instance however, the study aims at emphasizing the need to use language to teach literature to our literary students in both secondary and tertiary institutions. This is highly desirable following the ever dwindling performance of our students in English Language. The study holds the view that a systematized training in stylistic theory and methods will enable the students to (i) be more sensitive to language and more concerned with the codes; (ii) be exposed to grammatical, literary and stylistic categories employed by linguists in text interpretation; and (iii) be more proficient in English as he attempts explication of literary works.

Introduction

Fatusin (2004:45), while describing the lofty position English Language occupies in the life of Nigerians as individuals and as a sovereign state says "A meaningful survival of, and contribution to national life by an individual is hinged largely on the level of his or her proficiency in English. A low level of proficiency in English translates almost automatically to decreased personal a participation in national and even, regional affairs".

Despite the important position the English Language occupies in Nigeria, research findings have shown that students' performance in English usage is fast dwindling. This situation, Orisawayi (1987:6) pointedly says, is attributable, in part, to the fact that the students' teachers who serve as role models for them are "themselves at various stages of proficiency or competence" in English. Orisawayi (1987:6) concludes that "In effect the teacher's linguistic deficiency or efficiency is bound to affect negatively or positively the learning outcomes of the pupils' linguistic experience".

There is no doubt that the poor use of English by students, especially literary students at both the secondary or university is unacceptable. The question at this point is: Who is a literary student at these levels of education in Nigeria? At the secondary school level, a literary student is one who takes pure art subjects including Literature-in-English. At the university, the literary student is one offered admission to study any of Literature, Drama and Theatre Arts, and English Language. The pre-requisite for admission to study any of these programmes is five credit passes in art subjects including English and Literature in West African Examination Council or National Examination Council. Graduates of the aforementioned programmes are recruited to teach English Language and Literature. The pertinent question at this juncture is: To what extent is the level of language competence of these graduate teachers? Using the results of research on students' performance in English skill as yardsticks, one would be right to conclude that the English or Literature graduate is linguistically deficient. Though, that may be just one of the factors for the fast decline in the use of English by Nigerian students, it is a very crucial factor. To us in this study, this is not unconnected with the way literature as a subject is being taught over the years.

Relevance of Language in the Explication of Literary Text

The relevance of language in the interpretation of literary style has been a contentious issue among scholars. Some scholars do not see any need to attach any primary importance to language in the study of literature, while others hold the view that language is of primary importance in fiction. Fowler (1977:3) observes thus:

> *a writer's technique is, immediately and ultimately a craft in Language as Lodge says 'the novelists' medium is language: whatever he does, qua novelist, he does in and through language. The structure of the novel and whatever it communicates are under the direct control of the novelist's manipulation of language, and concomitantly, of the reader's recreative sympathy, his desire and ability to realise and release the technique from verbal clues deposited by the author.*

What the above quotation implies is that our understanding of how a literary text has been put together language-wise is very crucial to our understanding of the literary text itself. As rightly observed by Aina (1997:6),

> *Language is the means by which the reader gets at the message and aesthetics of the literary text*

Also, Adegoke (1998:3) buttresses the positions above when he asserts that:

> *Language is the locomotive engine that pulls the rest of the coaches. This being so, the analysis of a literary text proceeds from the language used in it:*

If the above presumptions are right, then the literary students in a second language situation like Nigeria need to be exposed to the discipline to which all those who believe language is part of the tool necessary for analysis and that discipline is stylistics.

As observed from outcomes of scholars' research that there is a consistent decline in the use of English by (literary) students and even the teachers of literature, there is the need to think of an approach that can reverse the trend.

What is Stylistics?

Stylistics is derived from the word 'style'. 'Style' itself derives its etymology from a Latin word 'stilus' an instrument made of metal or bone for writing on wax boards. Stylistics is a theory for analysis, interpretation and evaluation of texts.

Widdowson (1975:23) defines stylistics as the study of literary discourse from linguistic orientation. Short (1996:1) defines stylistics as an approach to the analysis of (literary) texts

using linguistic description. He adds that stylistics is concerned with relating linguistics facts (linguistic description) to meaning (interpretation) in as explicit a way as possible. Stylistics seeks to study the language used in literary texts with the aim of relating it to its artistic functions.

The Nature of Literature as a Subject in Nigeria's Secondary Schools

In Nigeria, the training of secondary school students for the purpose of writing West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) or National Examination Council (NECO) begins from Senior Secondary School One (SSS1) and this runs through (for art and literary students) to the second term of Senior Secondary School Three (SSS3). During this period, the students are expected to read a number of African and non-African literary works which cut across the three genres of literature. And until very recently the two examining bodies recommended different literary texts on prose, drama and poetry. Therefore, the students had a very high number of literary texts to study along with other subjects. As a way out, the students abandon the real texts for the summarized versions from which they gather tips on message, theme(s) characterization, setting, conflict(s) and so on. The students memorise the summarized versions and use this to respond to questions in West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination Council (NECO) and they pass even creditably without reading the actual texts. This, no doubt, does not assist the students in their literary studies or language use skill.

Realizing it has been counterproductive recommending different set of literary texts for the students by WAEC and NECO, they now recommend common texts to encourage the students in reading the texts instead of relying on abridged versions.

Going by the way literature is being handled and examined over the years as explained above and from experience as a former teacher of literature at the secondary school, I submit that the students of literature could not have fared better in their skill in use of English. It is these crop of linguistically deficient students who, for making credit passes in Literature by cramming summary texts, are offered admission into the university as literary students. Since the foundation of these undergraduates is terribly weak linguistically, it is most unlikely to expect

any remarkable linguistic achievement and or competence in such graduates of literary studies. Yet, it is these graduates of literary studies most of who are not linguistically efficient that will take up appointments as English Language and Literature-in-English teachers in Nigeria secondary schools. Consequently, it becomes a vicious circle. The main thrust of this paper is to suggest how this vicious circle can be broken.

If we agree to the argument that language is very important in the analysis of literary texts, there is therefore the need to expose literary students from the Senior Secondary School one to the basics of linguistic stylistics or elementary linguistics. The exposure at this level will serve as the foundation upon which the university training in literary text analysis will be built. It will also train the students to take a closer look at language, describe it and interprete what has been observed. As pointed out by Welleck (1971), students of stylistics cannot get along without the knowledge of grammar in all its branches - phonetics, phonemics, morphology, syntax, lexicography and the study of meaning. In other words, a solid knowledge of stylistics and its methods will enhance competence in English which is very essential in the examination and analysis of the language used in a literary text especially if one is a student of English as a Second Language. It is for this reason that Oyeleye (1985:3) asserts that literary students, particularly in the Second Language situation, need more than minimal linguistic competence to ensure fuller understanding of literary texts written in English.

We have noted earlier that literary students in Nigeria are those studying for degrees in Drama and Theatre Arts, Literature- in-English and English Language and that graduates of these disciplines are assumed to have got the skills to teach English Language or Literature or both. In other words, in both public and private secondary schools in Nigeria, Literature graduates are saddled with the teaching of English Language just as English Language graduates as well are also made to teach Literature on the assumption that the two disciplines are the same. This wrong assumption has since been noted by Healy (1966:11) and quoted by Latorre and Palacious (1980:229) as he contends that:

> *Language teaching and the study of literature are not necessarily concomitant activities which can be carried on by the same person concurrently.*

From the researcher's interactions with Literature, Drama and Theatre Arts graduates across some Nigeria Universities, we gather that while some never had any training in any language course for text interpretation e.g. stylistics. Some had peripheral training as the training they had in stylistics was mainly theoretical and that method was hardly treated. In fact, graduates of Drama and Theatre Arts across universities interacted with, claim their Departments did not mount any stylistics course.

From the interactions, we can note two observations. First, the Departments of English Language, Literature and Drama and Theatre Arts in Nigeria universities do not have or operate common syllabuses. For example, the courses that a student of Literature in one university will offer to lead to an award of degree in Literature differ from one Nigeria University to another. This is the same with the other disciplines. Second, a high percentage of the literary graduates and the students are not well-grounded in English Language which accounts for the non-impressive performance in English. This latter observation has since been noted by Mohammed (1986:10) when he states:

> *The competence of incoming student, on the average leaves much to be desired. In fact, it can be safely generalized that the linguistic competence of the incoming student and, for that matter, even the graduate of a Third World university - does not enable him to make a sense of a literary piece, let alone appreciate it. The student usually ends up glossing vocabulary items rather than studying literature for appreciation and analysis.*

We have maintained that literature teaching/learning is very crucial to achieving language competence in English. Nonetheless, the teaching/learning of literature in Nigeria secondary schools and tertiary institutions has not had any significant impact in the student's achievements in English as it has been proven by various research findings some of which had been mentioned earlier in this study. The reasons for this are many but one of the most fundamental is the extrinsic approach employed in the study of literature. If this approach to the study of literature is mainly employed in these institutions, the prevailing trend of underachievement in English will not abate.

This view is agreed with by Rodger (1983). who believes that students of English Literature in a second language situation need the knowledge of how to recognise the special conventions that operate in the domain of literary communication (which are usually more implicit than explicit) and how to make sense of what author of literature exploit in the code to convey meaning "Communication awareness" and "language consciousness" are skills needed by foreign students.

Similar to Rodger's view is that of Moody (1983:29-36). Moody proposes a model for the teaching of English Literature. The model is of two dimensions: extrinsic approach and intrinsic approach. The extrinsic component relates to the external factors in a literary piece and includes the historical, biographical, aesthetic and philosophical levels. The intrinsic component deals with the internal factors, which include the grammatical, lexical, structural and cultural levels.

Also, Munro (1983:60-61) expresses a view similar to the one above. Based on his long experience as a literature teacher in the Middle East, Munro feels that the primary concern of a teacher of English as a foreign literature is to "concentrate on the literary texts themselves, clarifying their meaning and assisting students to perceive the precision and vitality of the language the author has employed". By teaching English Literature this way, Munro believes the students have a far greater, richer, deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the English Language.

Recommendations

The need for the study of literature is not in doubt and this has been succinctly put by Povey (1979:162) when he says that literature would provide the learner with the "widest variety of syntax, the richest variation of vocabulary discriminations," and would provide examples of language "employed at its most effective, subtle and suggestive".

Nonetheless, the primary concern of this study is in trying to advocate for a change in approach to the study of literature. The current approach which emphasizes literary criterion in the study of literature has not had any significant impact in the students' linguistic achievement as have been shown in research findings.

Rather than dwelling on extrinsic factors such as aesthetics, biography, history etc, emphasis should be shifted to intrinsic components which include grammatical, lexical, structural and of course phonological levels. This approach, which can be termed linguistic- stylistic approach to the study of literature will enhance beter linguistic achievement in our students and graduanhance achieve this, the syllabuses of English literature at these levels have to be reviewed. At the secondary school level, the syllabus has to contain fundamentals of stylistics or elementary linguistics. The syllabus must also require the secondary school student to leam linguistic and stylistic categories used for text analysis. On poetry and prose analysis and interpretation, the syllabus must require the students to carry out this exercise using linguistic and literary criteria.

At the university, the curriculum for literary students must contain stylistics and the stylistics courses mounted must not be theory based. Method of analysis must be emphasized. This will equip the literary graduates to become efficient teachers if they choose to be teachers.

Conclusion

In this study, we have observed that the Nigeria literary graduates and secondary school students are linguistically incompetent. Yet, it is these graduates who take up teaching appointment as English teachers and Literature-in-English teachers in Nigeria secondary schools. Consequently, the vicious circle continues. The study identify a number of factors responsible for the poor achievement in English and have suggested that literary students at the secondary school and the university must be exposed to stylistics so as to make the students and the teachers better users of English.

REFERENCES

Adegoke, T. J. (1978) "Thematic Implications of the Use of Free Direct Speech and Free Indirect Style in Elechi Amadi's The Concubine and The Great Ponds".

Arua, A. E. (1997) "The Use of Free Indirect Style in Selected African Novels Written in English". An Unpublished Ph.D Thesis of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. 277

Fatusin, S. A (2004) "Grammatical Errors in the English Usage by "the Nigerian Undergraduate: Challenges and Prospects". In Journal of the School of Languages Vol.2.

Fowler, R. (1971) The Languages of Literature, London Routledge and K. Paul.

Healey, F. G. (1966) Foreign Language Teaching in the Universities. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Latorre, Guillermo, R. Palacious (1980) Some variables in the organisation of the modern language department IRAL 18,3.

Moody, H. L. (1983) Approaches to the study of Literature: A practitioner's view. In C.J. Brumfit's (ed) Teaching Literature Overseas: Language Based Approaches, Oxford: Pergamon.

Mohammed, R. Z. (1986) English Departments in Third World Universities: Language, Linguistics, or Literature? In English Teaching Forum: A Journal For The Teacher of English Outside The United States Vol. XXIV No. 4.

Munro, J. (1983) The decline and fall... and elevation of man of letters in the teaching of English. Papers from the First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities.

Orisawayi, D (1987) "Sentence Patterns in the Written English of Freshmen in a Nigerian College of Education: An Investigation". An Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Oyeleye, A. L., (1985) "The Language of Achebe's Early Novels (in the Context of Nigerian English) A Study in Literary Stylistics". An Unpublished Ph.D Thesis of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Povey, J. (1979) Teaching of Literature in Advanced ESL Classes. In ed. M. Celce-Murcia and L. McIntosh. English as a Second Language, Rowley. Mass: Newbury House.

Rodger, A. (1983) Language for Literature. In C.J. Brumfit's (ed) Teaching Literature Overseas: Approaches, Oxford: Pergamon.

Welleck, R. (1971) "Stylistics, Poetics and Criticism" Chatman (ed.) Literary Style: A Symposium. London: Oxford University Press.

Widdowson, H. G. (1975) Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature. London: Longman.

COLLEGES OF EDUCATION ACADEMIC STAFF UNION
COEASU
UNITY AND JOB SATISFACTION
UMAR SULEIMAN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION GASHUA
KNOWLEDGE FOR SERVICE
2024