IMPACT OF ORATURE IN STIMULATING THE INTEREST OF STUDENTS IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Literature in English remains a basic prerequisite for prospective students of English language in the country but the number of students who enroll for public examinations in it in the country over some time now has declined. Yet, the few who enroll for the subject have not been quite impressive in their performances in such examinations. It is the contention of this paper that, the lack of interest and poor performance of Nigerian students in literature are partly as a result of the exotic content of the curriculum of secondary schools at the moment. The paper is of the opinion that Oral literature has adequate generic and linguistic potentialities capable of enhancing a sustained interest of Nigerian students in the study of literature in the face of such reality. The paper therefore recommends oral literature as a potential remedy for the steady decline in the study of literature, which in effect, is adversely affecting the language education programs of the Tertiary institution in the country.

Introduction

A standing language learning policy in Nigeria today is that, no student is allowed to study English language in the university without at least a credit pass in literature in English at the Senior Secondary School Certificate or its equivalent level. The basic rationale behind this policy is most probably that, for a learner to be able to cope with the linguistic task of learning English effectively in the university, he must have been exposed to the language at the extensive literary

usage context. In the same manner, many Colleges of Education in the country also make literature in English a basic pre-requisite qualification for admitting students to study English.

The position above on the one hand is an indication of the importance of literature in the learning of English by Nigeria students at the tertiary level. Also, if we deem the assistance provided by literature to learners of English vital enough that we cannot ignore the relevance of literature in language learning, then it becomes incumbent on language teachers and language policy makers to continue exploring avenues to generate and sustain students' interest in literature. This becomes so important at the Secondary Schools level where the students make the choices of subjects that determine their eventual discipline at the tertiary education level.

Statistics have however revealed that there has been a steady decline in students' enrolment for literature in English in Senior School Certificate Examinations. The immediate result of this decline in literature scholarship is a drastic reduction in the enrolment and application of students into the English language department of the various tertiary institutions in the country. This situation on its own portends very serious danger for the future of teachers and other specialists in the subject area.

On the other hand, the decline may have a remote effect on the effective learning of English language in our schools, colleges and universities. For instance, incompetence in literature may be responsible for a reduction in the rate and extent to which students would comprehend in language classes. While an exposure to extensive reading in literature would assist the students in the speedy processing of comprehension and summary passages. Learning the various figures of speech would assist the students in semantics On the contrary however, lack of interest in literature may translate to serious predicaments in the above mentioned areas and other aspects of language learning (Onukaogu and Arua, 1996; Adetugbo, 1976).

One of the most basic problems confronting the learning of literature by Nigerian students is the lack of interest in the subject. This lack of interest is borne out of many other factors.

These factors include among others;

(a) Improper orientation into literary studies through the curriculum.

(b) Excessive reliance on foreign content, texts and genres.

(c) Lack of interest and competence on the part of teachers of literature.

(d) Unavailability of texts and learning facilities.

(e) Lack of models and practical exposure to experiences read in literature texts.

(f) Inability to understand texts and literature lessons.

Oral literature scholarship

Ordinarily, it should have been taken for granted that the subject, oral literature needs no introduction within the Nigerian linguistic and literary circle. But the reality of the situation is that quite a number of Nigerians still casually wave away some opportunities to actually have an in-depth knowledge of the subject. The subject is not included in the syllabus of the secondary schools and even at the Nigeria Certificate in Education level, it is not introduced. Where oral literature is taught at the university level, it is just for one or two semesters at the most.

For the above reasons therefore, let me briefly introduce the reader of this article to the subject of oral literature in order to provide some sort of footing for the main focus of the paper. Without trying to exaggerate, I have the feeling that oral literature simply means the spoken variety of literature. The three genres of literature-drama, prose and poetry are also contained in oral literature. Even though the three genres overlap and are interwoven, they are still distinct and can be so analyzed as they are done in written literature. (Akporobaro, 2001, Olugbamigbe, 2007).

Attempts to study the oral literary practices of Africans started long ago away from the shores of Africa. This venture, right from the onset, was fraught with a series of controversies. The issue of nomenclature generated the initial problem. It was although difficult initially for the European anthropologists to recognize this vast literary tradition as literature. So they refer to them in number of denigrate terms as "primitive" barbaric and "vanishing" traditions (Burton, 1865). Then came the partial recognition of the tradition as "folklore" coined by William Thomas, an English archivist, in 1846 and later, it was referred to as vernacular literature while William Bacon, an American anthropologist in 1955 called it "verbal art", a name that first captured its

orality. All these names are obviously inadequate in solely capturing the total essence of the vibrant forms known as oral literature (Dundes, 1969).

Jack Berry, an Oxford Professor, in 1961 devised the term," spoken literature" while Pio Zirimu, an Ugandan Professor of Linguistics coined the term "Orature" to describe oral literature. It was however Ruth Finnegan who adopted the present name, oral literature, to describe the literary practices of Africans in her Oral Literature in Africa (1970). Though scholars still debate the appropriateness of the antithetical name, it remains the most accepted name for the literary form to date.

Just like its written counterpart, oral literature derives from, and recreates the culture of the people that practise it. As such, it covers the entirety of the existence of Africans; their culture, customs, institutions, people and environment. It is almost impossible to draw a line of demarcation between oral literature and the real existence of the Africans. For this reason, foreign scholars hold on to the opinion that it is rather cumbersome to study oral literature as it implies studying the complete existence of the race. Yet, a closer look at these oral forms exposes a range of distinctive artistic practices some of which require long training and high professionalism.

Oral literature scholarship them and teaching of literature

Generically, oral literature as noted above is replete with the three traditional genres of literature-drama, poetry, prose. The educational essence of this is that oral literature has the contextual potentiality to offer an alternative syllabus to written literature.

Though there exist series of argument for or against the sameness of the numerous ritual festivals of Africa and the western orthodox theatre, there are evidences that the dramatic genre was a mature artistic form in Africa even before the introduction of western education into the continent (Essiekwe, 1980) In the same manner, Okpewho (1983) establishes the presence of the prose genre in traditional African society though it existed in the form of the epic narration. Professionalization of the poetic patronage dated back to many centuries in Africa and virtually all the western poetic sub-genres like odes, ballad, elegy, lullaby, epics, etc. have their manifestation in the traditional African context (Olugbamigbe, 1997).

Most of the problems plaguing the effective learning of literature in Nigeria bother on boredom and a general lack of interest by students. Oral literature comes in very relevant in solving this problem because it is performance-oriented. The most basic way of identifying the generic classification of genres of oral literature is by watching the performance of that genre. For instance, praise poetry is a cross-generic subject in oral literature. It can be the content of epic narration as in the epics of Sundiata and Chaka (Johnson 1992, Thomas Mofolo 1984). It can also be a prominent feature in a ritual drama or the dominant element in panegyric poetry. Apart from these, its use cuts across the various poetic sub genres like *ijala*, dirges, ode, war songs, lullabies, etc. The same lexico-semantic items may be featured in these performances, but each performance determines the differences in its exploitation. These performances in essence are capable of eliciting and nourishing students' interest in oral literature scholarship.

Students are a part of the society that practices these literary forms. So they have an insight into a lot of the details involved. This situation can be used in ensuring that learning becomes more relatively permanent in learners of literature. Also, since students already know the issues, thematic and the stylistic features that constitute oral literature, they learn faster and their experiences make the transfer of learning easier even, from oral written literature.

In the process of learning oral literature, students are made to participate in the real performances of lot of these literary forms. Just like the popular Chinese saying goes:

"What I hear I forgot

What I see I remember

What I do I know."

Many of our students lose interest in literature because they more often than not, forget the cues they are given in class because the lessons are mostly in abstractions. Since most of the experiences that constitute the content of such lessons are taken from foreign lands rather than the ones that have immediate relevance to the child's socio cultural environment. Students therefore struggle to understand what they are taught. Oral literature however would provide

sufficient opportunity for students to practicalize what they are learning which enhances their understanding and sustain their interest.

One of the peculiarities of oral performances is that the audiences as well as the actors are well versed in the content and style of performances. This presupposes that both the teacher of oral literature and his students are already aware of the crux of what is to be taught and learnt and puts the teacher in a better position than in the present situation where some teachers of literature grope in the darkness of ignorance or lack of interest in the content of the present literary studies.

Apart from the pure forms of traditional oral artistic practices that constituted the entire texts used by earliest researchers in oral literature such as the religious poetry, praise poetry, epic narrations, rituals and festivals, there now abound in Africa deliberate attempts by Africans to adapt and adopt the traditional forms in creating modern literary contents and contexts. Such adaptations might be in the organizing motifs of such writers as we have *Ogun*, the Yoruba god of creativity and retribution as the underlying motif in the works of Wole Soyinka. This also explains the recurrence of *Chi* or personal god running through the works of Chinua Achebe. Some writers adapt the thematic of African oral literature which derive from their body of belief and myths, while some exploit the stylistic features of literary genres from the oral literature. A good example exists in the wholesome exploration of the Yoruba folktale narrative style by Amos Tutuola in all his narrative works. Such other stylistic adaptations are the Ijala tone by Alabi Ogundepo, *lyere ifa* by Yemi Eleburu Ibon and trickster narratives of the *Anansesem* by Aidoo. (Olugbamigbe, 2007). All these

point to the fact that apart from the existing literary materials, the point to society can come out with more than sufficient texts to cope Nice the needs of the students if oral literature is introduced into the curriculum of our secondary schools.

Though, many universities in the country today offer courses in oral literature, the units allocated to the discipline are grossly inadequate as teaching ends at mere glossing over issues and topics in the subject. The situation is worse in the Colleges of Education where the teachers of our school children have no opportunity to be introduced to the vibrant art of oral literature. If all these inadequacies are to be removed, now is the time to introduce oral literature into the

curriculum of Nigerian secondary schools so that the higher institutions of learning would soon begin to benefit from the output of potential oral literature scholars from that level.

Ordinarily, one expects that introducing oral literature into Nigerian schools afresh would generate a lot of problems. The problems might include shortages of teachers, unavailability of instructional facilitators and materials, negative effects of Western religions and civilization etc. All these problems are those that cannot last if the educational planners are serious about implementing the lofty programmes. Also, every investment, human and materials into programmes, would be worth it, if we consider the immense benefit of oral literature in revamping the dwindling interest of Nigerian learners in literature.

Also, one other potential area of problem is that of translation. This is an area that has generated a lot of controversies based on the disparities between the local experiences of African rituals festivals, institutions and the target English Language for expressing them (Osundare, 1981). This problem, however, may not constitute much impediment as expected if one considers the degree of influence that the oral tradition has had on written literature this far without causing a distortion in the meanings expressed. Whether one likes it or not, a variety of English that can be called the Nigerian English is gradually emerging (Akindele and Adegbite 2004). Who knows, an alternative oral literature scholarship may also crop up that may quicken the emergence and eventual acceptability and popularity of this variety.

Conclusion

Since the ultimate target of language education is to enable learners use the target language to express their experiences, the end itself becomes part of the means of achieving the end through oral literature scholarship. This is because the experiences to be expressed now form the bases for language development through the study of oral literature. This paper is of the strong belief that with the introduction of oral literature in Nigerian schools, the problem of lack of interest and other related problems would no longer constitute encumbrances to the effective teaching and learning of literature and as a result, the task of effective language education in the country would be much easier. This is however not to say that the entire syllabus of literature and foreign contents should be discarded. While both the written and oral variety are taught as

complementary syllabi, oral literature scholarship could be the required stepping stone to developing the right attitude and disposition to a better performance in written literature by Nigerian students.

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