

## Towards the Enhancement of Literacy Acquisition in Literature Classroom Discourse in Nigerian Universities

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### 1. Introduction

Research studies have shown that literacy flourishes in an atmosphere that is immersed with prints. Literature in general and creative literature in particular enhances language learning and promotes literacy skills. Where the atmosphere is immersed in fiction, fact, textbooks and newsreel, literacy instruction will be easy. N. Atwell (1987:p.23) and C.E. Onukaogu & I.N. Ohia (1997:p.47) among other scholars opined that language is a whole and is better taught as a whole. They explained further that communicative skills that make up language are also a whole and are better taught as that. These skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking-thrive where literature is.

Literature, therefore, provides the avenue for extensive, sustained and interesting reading, writing, listening and speaking. As a resource used to develop literacy skill, literature occupies a central place in the reading curriculum. For emerging and developing readers, literature provides them an opportunity to exercise their skills, strategies and interests. For independent readers, literature provides pleasure, which should be the reason to learn to read.

### 2. Obstacles to the Emergence of a Reading Culture

Unfortunately, an average student in the Nigerian University does not want to read selected literary texts even when he realizes that to a large extent, his knowledge and understanding of the text will determine his success in the examination for the course. Many students privilege the reading of the teacher's note over the reading of the text itself. This is partly because the average Nigerian reader, if he reads at all, is not a spontaneous lover of books. Cindy Giorgis & Nancy Johnson (2003, p.843) lamented that "literature without a reader is merely a print on page but when readers bring their curiosities, emotions and life experiences to stories: true and imagined, there is no telling what the responses will be". Chukwuemeka Ike (1998:p.2) attributed failure to read to people's attitudes to books. He put the case succinctly:

Nigeria does not have a reading culture. .... We are reminded that our ancestors had an oral tradition. A change from the oral culture to the book culture would require a process of sustained conditioning to open up the consciousness to appreciate the indispensability of books to our overall well being and turn us into book lovers.

To turn our students and indeed Nigerians into book lovers, Ike (1998) proposed a sensitization programme including establishment of book club, organization of public reading and reading competition workshops and seminars which would involve the whole society and especially teachers and parents. This would help in developing the emerging reader into an independent reader. This measure, it is believed, would change people's attitudes to books. When the desired attitudinal change is achieved, then other things relating to literacy skills will fall into their proper places.

Emeyonu (1983) and Adegbite (2003:p.90) also observe that Nigerian students are poor readers. They do not read for pleasure, rather, they read to pass examinations. Adegbite explained further that many literates even lapse into illiteracy. He concluded that to correct the situation, there is need to mould and change people's attitude positively towards texts. This situation calls for a conscious effort at identifying and addressing the major obstacles to the emergence of a culture of reading spontaneously in the Nigerian society. Some of these even appear more crucial than the attitudinal change mentioned by Ike and Adegbite. One of such is that most relevant literature textbooks are not readily available, and where they are, they are not economically accessible to an average student. Students therefore use this as an excuse for not reading prescribed literature textbooks.

Besides, literature classroom discourse is devoid of a robust literacy programme, which includes reading, writing, listening, negotiating and constructing meaning from literary texts. The University syllabus on literature emphasizes more on exposing students to the academic mainstream through a knowledge of literary terminology and techniques, trends and forces shaping creative writing (rarely teaching creative writing itself) and concepts underlying literary theory. In places where creative writing is taught, little attempt is made to engage students in extensive writing which is followed with sharing of ideas.

Most times, University students are treated as independent readers. They ought to be, but some of them are not. Teachers assume that as independent readers, the reading of selected literature texts, especially, prose narratives, should be done before lessons commence and should not be made to disturb the flow of academic discourse during lectures. In most cases, only occasional references are made to literature texts in lectures. There are hardly opportunities for such literacy enhancing activities as read alouds; where reading sessions are organized, they are done as out of class activities.

### **3. Developing a Learner- Friendly Literacy Environment**

One of the ways by which a teacher can attract and sustain students' interest in reading is to read aloud interesting portions of

selected literature texts. There are tremendous benefits in read alouds. They create the opportunity for learners to listen to stories, build a rich background “of literary knowledge and language structure and introduce .... new titles, genres, authors and illustrators”(Nancy Johnson & Cindy Giorgi, 2003b:704)

There is need to engage students in activities which will develop their literacy skills. They should not only be allowed to discuss during tutorial classes, they should also be encouraged to write in response to literature texts. Most of the writing exercises given to students are geared only towards assessment: grading and awarding of marks. Little wonder then that the only kind of reading and writing that students engage in are those that have to do with examinations.

Many students see reading and writing as cumbersome tasks because these two exercises are attached to examinations. But if we create a classroom environment where reading and writing are valued activities, it will improve the declining interest in reading and writing. There is need to give students specific time to read, allow them sometimes, to choose their reading materials and allow them respond to literature. All these will motivate them and “deepen their engagement with texts” ( Susan Hynds, 1997:p 7).

We find Venezky’s (1990) view relevant to the Nigerian situation. He observed that teachers do not allow the reading of non-fiction in literature classes. Reading materials such as magazine and informational books are some of the reading materials which attract adolescents. So, they should be encouraged to read them, when such literatures are found to be relevant. When students have access to materials that fascinate them, this will enhance their learning and promote voluntary reading.

Most times, teachers treat texts as sacred things which contain world wisdom rather than occasions for considering challenges or occasions for making an impact on that world. For this reason teachers rarely allow students deconstruct texts or even respond to the process of literature. There is need to allow students write about the reading and writing experience which best demonstrate their growth as literature students.

Teachers tend to adopt the formalists’ perspective by laying emphasis on the literary text, its form, imagery and meaning. This is good, but there is also value in helping students make personal connections with the text they read. There is little classroom talk surrounding students’ literary reading. Where students are made to talk, such talks rarely focus on extra literary issues that are social or political in nature which are of relevance to the student’s very existence. If teachers want their students to be functionally literate and not

eventually relapse into illiteracy, they must make them see the relevance of literature to life and encourage students to connect what they read to their life experiences.

Looking at a work of fiction from the perspective of the reader or audience, Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson (1993:p.47) explained that people have varied opinions about interpretations because we read in different ways:

It is the reader who applies the code in which the message is written and in this way actualizes what would otherwise remain only potentially meaningful.

The role that the reader plays in constructing meaning cannot be overemphasized. The reader is actively involved in meaning making. We share the reader-oriented perspective of Wolfgang Iser, that the meaning of a text is never self-formulated; but at the same time, we hold the view that the textual material cannot be ignored. The text starts off the process of meaning making and the reader fills in the blanks and gaps between the texts. (Selden & Widdowson,1993:p.55-7). This is based on the previous experience of the reader which he brings to bear on the text in hand. Whether the text is 'open' or 'closed', such that it invites the reader's collaboration in the production of meaning or they are 'closed' such that the codes in them enforce meaning towards a particular side, the reader is a key performer in the process of meaning making (Selden & Widdowson p.49).

Besides in order to promote high order thinking that is critical, resourceful, reflective and creative, teachers should allow students discover (rather than give) information from literary texts. As we mentioned earlier, there is need to read texts in the class occasionally. Before reading is done, teachers should let students make predictions by looking at picture clues and illustration in the text, if there is any. Allow students comment on such clues as this will project their imagination and arouse their curiosity about the text.

#### **4. Using Graphic Organizers to enhance Literacy Acquisition**

Making literature come alive through the use of graphic organizers like a story map will enhance literacy acquisition. A story map serves as an effective technique in reading and writing. It can be used to help students predict characters, setting and plot in stories before they read. When reading is going on, story map provides an avenue for organizing information in the story while after reading, it provides idea for story writing (Yenika Agbaw *et al.* 2004: p.16). Here is a sample graph of story map:

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Characters** \_\_\_\_\_ **Setting** \_\_\_\_\_

**Problem** \_\_\_\_\_

**Event # 1** \_\_\_\_\_

**Event # 2** \_\_\_\_\_

**Event#3** \_\_\_\_\_ **Conclusion** \_\_\_\_\_

*Fig 1:cf.Agbaw et.al.2004:p.17*

Yenika *et al.* opined further that a teacher can create a discussion web. Using this graphic is a “useful exercise which can consolidate and reinforce new knowledge about a literature text, prepare learners for a writing activity and strengthen their critical thinking skills” (11). To do this, he teacher writes a statement or question which generates a debate on the board. Such statement or question could be such that arises from one of the selected texts. Ask learners to list reasons (their opinions) why they agree and disagree with the statement. This way, they will be able to look at the two sides of the same coin. They will share their opinions with their partners and eventually with the whole class. Individual students can then be asked to write a short essay in which they state their personal opinion on the topic. Below is a sample discussion web graphic organizer.

**Discussion Web**

| <b>Agree (Pro)</b> | <b>Disagree (Con)</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| _____              | _____                 |
| _____              | _____                 |

**Conclusion** \_\_\_\_\_

*Fig.2:cf.Agbaw et.al.2004:11*

Readers’ theatre which is a learner-centred perspective to teaching, allows the teacher to consolidate his teaching. When a concept or idea is taught and students are made to dramatize it, then they can improvise, add ideas to the story, examine character types in the story and be creative with language and concepts that they learn from texts. They do not have to memorize parts but rather read dialogues, add more characters and speeches if need be.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, despite literacy scholars' contention that literature plays a crucial role in literacy acquisition, we have argued that both learners and teachers of Literature-in-English in Nigerian Universities pay little attention to literacy acquisition in literature classroom discourse. We opined that the problem is due partly to learners' attitude to books and also partly to teachers' attitude to literacy skills acquisition. Teachers reduce reading and writing - two signifiers of literacy - to tasks performed for the purpose of examination. We explained that although most of our University students are not spontaneous and independent readers, yet, if teachers adopt holistic, learner-centred and process-centred techniques of teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking, it will help in enhancing the literacy of our University students.

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