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CONTENTS

Keys to vocabulary development with elementary English language learners – Gwen McAlpine, Debra Coffey & Beth Donaldson	1
A diagnosis of dyslexia problems of selected senior secondary school students in Ibadan North-East, Oyo state – Dr. (Mrs.) Margret O. Alegbeleye.....	2
Assessing the reading comprehension ability of the First Year Students of Haramaya University, Ethiopia – Nneka, Umera-Okeke.....	19
Children literature in Nigeria: the Yoruba example – Adeyinka, Adeyemi A.	33
Effects of continuous assessment on Mathematics achievements of high school students in Ethiopia – Asmamaw Abebe Biabeyin & Ojo, Babajide J.....	41
Effects of moral dilemma and problem-solving strategies' on students' achievement in conservation, waste management, pollution and overpopulation concepts in Biology – Dr. Alice M. Olagunju & Dr. E. U. Chukwuka.....	55
Gender and choice of forestry as alternative career among science-based students in University of Ibadan, Nigeria – Azeez, Ismail O.	68
Resource availability, utilization and academic achievement in Botswana – M. R. Dambe, F.R.Moorad & O.A.Afemikhe.....	81
An Investigation of the Child-friendly Environmental Status of Primary Schools in terms of nature of classrooms – Chukwuma C. Agomoh & Jeremiah G. Adewale.....	94

Children literature in Nigeria: the Yoruba example

By

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Abstract

The aesthetic and therapeutic effects of literature on the life affect both the old and young. Yoruba oral literature accords due respect to children in its poetry and drama as it has a myriad of renditions like songs, lullabies, poems and folktales for their listening and participation enjoyment. In contemporary Nigeria, love for written children literature in Yoruba is dying as many authors do not write for children while publishers also show little interest in publishing materials in the indigenous languages. This paper examined the prospect of children written literature in Yoruba by considering the efforts of writers so far and the problems facing it today. Suggestions on how to sustain it and improve on its teaching in schools in the 21st century are also offered.

Introduction

The primary aim of literature is to give pleasure and entertain those who voluntarily attend to it (Moody, 1968). Hence every literary work of art takes cognizance of this. However, no literature emerged first as written as the basis of every literature is its orality.

Literature therefore serves as the repository of folklores. In Africa for instance, literature is helping to express the true spirit of the New Africa in which the twenties century and past ages flow into one another against the logic of a space-time continuum ever moving towards the future (Ramsaran, 1970).

Yoruba oral literature accords due respect to children in its poetry which comes in the likes of folktales, lullabies, oriki (cognomen) and mnemonics which serve as aid-

mnemonics for counting from one to ten (Majasan, 1969, Isola, 1995). It also serves as the most potent weapon of ensuring continuity and vitality. Lullabies and oriki, according to Isola, serve as origin of literature as they ensure the mental and psychological health of the child thus promoting a robust intellectual development.

Yoruba folktales are of immense value for indirectly introducing the child to the socio-economic relations in the society because the folktales of a people tend to serve as commentaries on their fears and aspirations. Furthermore, folktales bring joy and instruction to the children through stories and songs. They are meant to give the picture of the society through exposure to examples of life (Olunlade; 1990). For example, in the song:

*Ojo n ro, sere ninu ile,
Ma wonu ojo,
Ki aso re ha ba a tutu,
Ki otutu ma ba a mu o.*

Rain is falling, play inside,

*Do not enter the rain,
That your clothe be not wet,
That you do not catch cold.*

Lullabies, according to Hornby (1974), are songs for lulling a baby to sleep. Mothers are fond of singing these songs anytime their children feel uneasy or are crying. However, whenever it is observed that a child feels restless and not sleeping after which some lullabies had been sung, mothers, especially elderly women in the home, resort to chanting the oriki (cognomen) of the child and this, according to Isola (1995) and Ogundeji (1998) has been proved to be very effective over the years. This is because, no sooner had the cognomen begun than the child slept off.

Yoruba Written Children Literature

Much efforts had been made by some scholars to transmit the rich culture of the Yoruba which are embedded in their literature. Authors like Abiodun (1971), Atanda (1972) Sosanya (1976), Babalola (1979), Odunjo (2002), Fagunwa (2005) and a few others have either retold known Yoruba folktales in their books or told other children stories. It is however disheartening to note that the more literate a society becomes, the less effective is its morality (Oyesakin: 1990). Things were not like this before the turn of the twentieth century as most children literary genres in Yoruba were oral and were transmitted orally from generation to generation.

In Africa, Things Fall Apart (1958) by Chinua Achebe can be taken to mark the beginning of mern African literature after which many literary works in many languages made their debut. This literary renaissance must be seen as a counterpart of the tremendous

development – political, economic and cultural – which has occurred in the post colonial era (Moody, Gunner and Finnegan, 1984).

Meanwhile, it must be pointed out that the emergence of books in many literary forms (poetry, drama, short stories, autobiographies, novels etc) did not produce many children books. Before the turn of the century. Tucker (1976) and *Encyclopedia Americana* (2004) observed that books like Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels and Pilgrim's Progress which children claimed to have liked were the very few ones in the market and they are not enough to measure the extent to which a child liked children's literature because at independence in 1960 up till the eighties, English poetry is taught in Yoruba society from the nursery school to the University (Oyesakin 1990).

As mentioned above, the efforts of some writers brought Yoruba children's literature to the limelight. However, there are more to these children's literature than these writers have produced. In addition, the paucity of children's literature and the non-challant attitude of proprietors and proprietresses of private nursery and primary schools in particular and government in general to teaching Yoruba and by extension, Yoruba children literature, does not allow us to know what books children like and produce a formula for writing relevant children literature. We shall discuss some purely cognitive and intellectual limitations that most children have at some ages that apply to books in this paper.

While Fagunwa's novels are embraced by children because of the

folktale tradition that be employed, they are equally enjoyed by adults because his works lend themselves to interpretation at two levels – the ordinary (children's) level and the allegorical (adult) level (Isola, 1995). This means that folktales are enjoyed by both children and adults. Isola

(i) *Ise ni oogun ise
Mura si ise ore mi
Bi a ko ba reni feyinti
Bi ole la a ri
Bi a ko ba reni gbekele
A tera mo ise eni*

which literally translates as:

*Work hard my friend
If we find no one to lean on
One is like a lazy person
If we find no one to depend on
One will concentrate on one's work.*

This poem reveals the high respect that the Yoruba people attach to hard work. It encourages a child to work hard and not to rest on his or her oars if such a child does not have a very wealthy parent. The summary of this poem is to encourage every

(ii) *Ise agbe nise ile wa
Eni ko sise
A ma jale
Iwe kiko
Laisi oko ati ada
Ko tpe o
Ko tpe o*

which literally translates as:

*Farming is our national occupation
Whoever does not work
Will steal
Formal education
Without hoe and cutlass
Is incomplete
Is incomplete.*

The poem above reveals the major occupation of the Yoruba which is farming. It also points out the fact that formal education should be combined with farming in order to bring about a balanced man in the society. The poem is a reminder to every child to cultivate habit of

had earlier observed that the language of Fagunwa is simple but highly patterned.

In the case of Odunjo, his poems have endeared many children to Yoruba language. Some common examples are:

child to depend on his or her own ability to work hard and be able to sustain himself or herself as human confidence is vanity. Beyond handwork, they also promote the values of skills competencies virtues etc

practicing agriculture, in whatever little way the child can. Most of these poems in Odunjo's Alawiiye series are noted for their moral qualities based on the Yoruba beliefs about child education. These poems, according to Isola (1995) are designed to help children understand the way the

society is organised and to make them behave in a way that is acceptable in Yoruba culture.

Other study on children literature like Babalola's 'Akojopo Alo Ijapa' (1979), Sosanya's 'Ewi Omode' (1976), Abiodun's 'Arofo Awon Omode' (1971), Atanda's 'Ewi fun awon Omode' (1972) are geared toward building moral and character training in the Yoruba child and making him or her fit squarely into the culture of the society. It is on the basis of this that attempt is made in this paper to examine the features of children literature.

Features of Children Literature

The age we are in is that of information communication and technology (ICT). Many children from elitist homes are exposed to many communication gadgets such as the satellite dish, mobile phones and the internet both at home and in their schools. These had widened their horizon. Be that as it may, Odejide (1986) asserts that children's literature should enrich the life of the children, stimulate their imagination and help them to develop their intellect. The onus now rests on writers and publishers of works of art related to children to bear these facts in mind.

In addition to the above, Odejide (2004) enumerates the parameters that should be considered by any writer of children literature. These includes:

- (i) The age group of the target audience and their presumed cognitive and affective levels,
- (ii) The function of the literature meant for them,
- (iii) The qualities which distinguish such a literature from adult literature,

- (iv) The awareness that children's literature is to assist the child to invent.

It could be deduced from these parameters that the age group of the target audience will inform the language and materials to use and also guide the length of the literature because children of a lower age will be comfortable with short stories with many pictures than children of a higher age.

Also, before a writer of children literature sets about his task, he or she must bear the functions of any literary work of art – to inform, reform and entertain – in mind. Children literature books should be of desirable experience rather than realistic. Children have a tremendous capacity to see things inaccurately in a heroic, sometimes rather than romantic way.

One of the qualities which distinguish children literature from adult's is that the child needs somebody in a book with whom he or she can identify as a child. This accounts for the presence of many animals or children in children's books and the comparative paucity of adults, especially parents. A popular children book must have some sort of connection with the task of children. Animals and children will use play as a way of learning to be an adult.

Lastly, the essence of any children literature should be to embrace the whole content of a child's imaginative world and that of his daily environment so as to inculcate in the child the ability to reason and invent. When a child reads any work of art, some lessons which will inform the child and therefore make him or her reason appropriately should be derived.

These features might have informed the study carried out by Dasylyva (2007) who examines the

various themes and stylistic features of Yoruba children's oral and written literature. She observes the developmental stages that Yoruba children's literature have gone through from the 1970s to the twentieth century and concludes that the setting in both the prose and drama texts is a conspicuous reflection of the Yoruba cultural life. She submits that Yoruba children literature had gone from the folktale tradition to the criticism of the social values.

Yoruba Literature in the Curriculum

Literature in the curriculum of any language and at all levels of education helps in achieving the overall process of curriculum development. This is because the curriculum is expected to aid the development of each student in the following realms:

- (i) Intellectual (cognitive)
- (ii) Emotional (affective)
- (iii) Linguistic (communicative).

Apart from the above, literature must also help the individual in the development of an appropriate self image, and of concepts of the communities to which she/he belongs. It must also contribute to the development of values, that is, the ideals and objectives of the society.

Literature, cannot by merely being prescribed in the curriculum cannot produce any kind of guarantee result, its values, rewards and pleasures, can only arise if it is properly studied (Moody et al 1984). The beauty of any work of art is revealed when it is analysed along the parameter of the values to be derived, the positive rewards it brings to its recipients and the pleasures

recipients, derive. No meaningful study can however take place unless steps are taken to ensure that qualified personnel and adequate teaching materials are provided.

In the primary school curriculum literature is embedded in the language lesson this is, it is integrated. This is understandable because the learners have a limited mental capacity to absorb information. Besides, most of what they are taught are through play. It is not surprising therefore to see all Yoruba texts, be it Alawiyee or Taiwo and Kehinde incorporating Yoruba literature, especially, poems, songs, and folklores though few, at the primary level.

At the pre-primary level however, it must be observed that no book has been produced in Yoruba for this children. Although this runs contrary to the policy of the National Policy on Education (2004) which stipulates that teaching and learning at this stage must be in the child's indigenous language while the few day-care centres (jeleosinmi) have imbibed the culture of teaching in English.

At the junior secondary school level, the integrated approach is used. Yoruba literature texts are recommended and students are examined in them at the Junior School Certificate Examination alongside Yoruba language. The problem of literature teaching at this level is that of insufficient time for the teaching of Yoruba on the school time table hence, teachers do not have time to teach all the rudiments and components of literature. The same thing applies to Senior Secondary Level as the subject which has been separated since 1998 is now integrated as a single subject with effect from 2006.

The problem of Yoruba literature teaching and learning is compounded by publishers who publish few children literature in Yoruba because readership scope is restricted whereas many literature texts in English are published because readership extends beyond the frontiers of Nigeria. The limited quantities of Yoruba literature text available are produced for adults.

Impediments to Yoruba Children's Literature

One major reason for the dearth of Yoruba children literature book is the lack of interest that Nigerians have in reading. The few authors that write for children are mainly interested in profit making their orientation is towards the audience that would bring the desired profit.

Added to the above is the fact that most publishers are interested in the profit margin that accrues to them at the end of any production unlike in the developed countries where the audience takes precedence over profit. Most publishing houses estimate the proposed number of copies to be sold before they undertake to publish any book (Ker, 1995)

More pathetic is the fact that most publishing houses do not publish books in the indigenous languages, and in this case, Yoruba. The reason for this is because of the 'complex' nature of Yoruba orthography which requires tone marks and diacritics (Adeyinka, 1997).

Another problem facing the production of children literature is that observed by Oyesakin (1990). According to him;

Some of the genres like 'orin agbe', 'orin etiyeri and 'aro' are on the

verge of total extinction while others like 'iwi egungun', 'ese ifa' and 'ijala' only peep into modern civilization through the radio, television and written literature.(pg 241)

Furthermore, most parents especially the literate has detest, speaking the Yoruba language, both at home and in school. This is the reason why private nursery and primary schools thrive at the expense of public schools in Nigeria today.

Once the child is made to realize that his/her mother tongue is a 'vernacular' and should be despised at the primary school level of education, secondary schools help the nose diving of the importance of the mother-tongue by asking the students not to speak 'vernacular' or be penalized for contravening the rule

Improving Production and the Teaching of Children Literature

Having established the fact that literature mirrors they society and serves as a way of transmitting the values and ideas of a society, there is an urgent need to arrest the downward trend in the individual teaching of Yoruba literature to children.

There is the need for a re-evaluation of the primary school curriculum. In the present time when government is introducing universal basic education, the curriculum should be designed in such a way that the desired economic, political and cultural development of the nation will be embedded in the various teaching subjects, including Yoruba literature.

Trained teachers in Yoruba should be encouraged to write literature texts in Yoruba for children. This will be made possible if

government provides grants in form of soft loan to them with which to publish.

Added to the above is the fact that government can encourage team writing of texts for children by assembling teachers of the language in a hotel with the attendant luxuries; with a view to producing texts for the young ones. The cost of producing the text will be government's while royalty, worked on agreed percentage, should be paid to writers.

Another way to increase the teaching of Yoruba children literature in school is to reduce the cost of raw materials for publishing through the removal of import duties on printing machines. This will encourage printers and publishers to produce at cheap rates.

Efforts should also be made to encourage the development of indigenous technology. It is believed that the production of printing materials locally would reduce, to the barest minimum, the cost of importing such and eliminate the payment of import duties. The various paper industries in Nigeria like the Iwopin Paper Mill, Jebba Paper Mill and Oku-Iboku Paper Mill should be resuscitated.

This will make it possible to go into full production thereby making printing papers available to publishing companies at very cheap rates. Also, more indigenous children should feature on our radio and television stations. This will encourage children to listen to and enjoy the rich repertoire of Yoruba literature.

Conclusion

One of the ways through which we can transmit our cherished cultural heritage in Yorubaland, to foster unity in diversity faith peace and

progress is through children literatures. More emphasis should be placed on teaching it in the curriculum by allotting sufficient time to it on the school time table, recruiting qualified teachers for its teaching in schools and giving such teachers inducement allowance as government does for English and sciences.

Production of texts suitable for children educative, informative and entertaining advantages should be encouraged by government and agencies connected with education through aids, seminars, conferences and retreats. Outcomes of such could be collected by a committee and good children materials produced. With government financial backing, and grant from foreign agencies, sufficient and relevant materials in Yoruba children literature will be produced.

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