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THE ROLES OF LITERATURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS : THE CASE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The teaching of Literature in French in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination syllabus has spanned several decades in the Nigeria system of Education. It forms an integral part of the examination syllabus together with Essay and letter writing, Translation Lexis and structure, Dictation, Listening comprehension, reading of texts, conversation and cultural studies. A lot of controversies have trailed the continuous inclusion of French Literature into the examination syllabus at this level due to some problems encountered by students which include among others: lack of interest, language deficiency and non-availability of reading texts. Therefore, this paper sought to investigate the relative importance of literature to the development of language skills in the foreign language learning programme with particular interest in French language as the second official language in Nigeria.

It was affirmed in this paper that literature helps in the training of the mind, it serves as authentic materials for language learning and it motivates the learners because it is open to interpretation and gives room for drawing inferences from the reading texts. It was also concluded that the link between culture and language should not be over-emphasized in foreign language learning programme. Language competence and cultural competence are two essential skills in foreign language learning that could be treated in isolation without doing any harm to the acquisition of these skills.

Keywords: role, literature, development, skills, foreign language, French, cultural competence

Résumé

Cela fait des décennies que l'enseignement de la littérature française est au programme au cours secondaire du système éducatif nigérian. Elle fait partie intégrante du programme des classes d'examen au même titre que la rédaction, la traduction, la grammaire, la dictée, la compréhension orale, la lecture, la conversation et la culture. La présence de la littérature française dans le programme des classes d'examen jusqu'à présent suscite des controverses due aux difficultés que rencontrent les apprenants. Ces difficultés ont pour noms le manque d'intérêt, la carence lexicale, le non disponibilité de textes. Ce travail s'intéresse donc à l'importance de la littérature dans l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère comme le français, deuxième langue officielle du Nigéria.

A travers cette étude nous pouvons retenir que la littérature aide la mémoire, elle est un outil indispensable pour l'apprentissage d'une langue. La littérature motive l'apprenant car ouverte à toutes sortes d'interprétation et offrant à l'apprenant des ressources utiles à travers des textes lus. De plus, nous avons montré qu'un accent particulier ne doit être mis sur le lien entre littérature et culture dans les programmes d'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. Langue et culture sont deux compétences essentielles dans l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère pouvant être considéré séparément, sans pour autant que leur acquisition ne souffre d'aucune imperfection.

Mots-clés : rôle, littérature, développement, compétences, langue étrangère, français

Avant propos

L'étude de la littérature d'expression française dans le deuxième cadre de l'école secondaire au Nigéria a duré des années dans le système d'éducation Nigériane. Il fait partie intégrale du programme d'examen final de l'école secondaire avec les autres domaines comme l'expression écrite, la traduction, la dictée, la compréhension orale, la lecture,

l'expression orale et l'étude culturelle. Il y a des arguments concernant l'intégration de la littérature dans l'enseignement du français langue étrangère (FLE) au Nigéria. Cet argument est basé sur les problèmes que les apprenants du français rencontrent tels que le manque d'intérêt, le problème de la compétence linguistique et la disponibilité des textes littéraires à étudier. On a considéré alors dans cet étude, la contribution de la littérature d'expression française au perfectionnement du français en tant que la deuxième langue officielle au Nigéria.

On a affirmé que la littérature aide le développement du cœur et elle se considère comme une matière de base dans l'enseignement de la langue étrangère. La littérature sert à motiver les apprenants de la langue étrangère parce qu'elle se donne à l'interprétation du texte littéraire et permet de réfléchir sur les événements qui se déroulent dans les textes littéraires. En conclusion, la relation entre la langue étrangère et la culture de la langue étrangère se considère moins importante dans l'enseignement de la langue étrangère. Il faut nécessairement désintégrer la compétence linguistique et la compétence culturelle sans faire mal au perfectionnement de la langue étrangère chez les apprenants.

Introduction

The teaching of Literature has been an age long phenomenon in the history of modern language teaching globally. It forms an integral part of the curriculum of the foreign language programme. Literature is considered necessary in the foreign language programme because it is a reflection of the culture, norms and values and civilization of the society where the literature originates from. Learners are considered to be familiar with the culture and civilization of the target language community by reading the literatures of that community. This is expedient because language cannot be treated as an isolated concept without linking it with the culture of the target community. Apart from the cultural aspect of the literary study, it also helps in enhancing the language competence of the learners because the learners come across some expressions that are not readily available in the grammar or comprehension texts. The use of idiomatic expressions, proverbs and interplay of language structures can also go a long way in improving the communicative competence of the learners. Reading of literature can help in solving the problem of boredom experienced by learners in the course of foreign language learning.

The pleasure derivable from reading literary texts cannot be under-estimated. The learners show interest in the reading of the narrative texts especially when the story line appeals to their senses. This interest can only be sustained if the learners are not constrained

or limited by lack of vocabularies in the foreign language which could impede the comprehension of the text. The study of literature has spanned several decades and centuries with the emergence of numerous literary icons both in the English speaking and French speaking countries of the world. However, the study of Literature has added value to the study of foreign language even though its relative contributions to the development of language competence in the learners has been variously criticized.

Literature and foreign language learning

It is believed that the introduction of literature to foreign language learning programme, engenders the development the language skills in the learners. At the inception of the language learning programme, lack of language competence of the learners constitutes an obstacle to integrating literature into language learning programme. The competence required to study literary texts at the under- graduate level can only be attained at the second year of language learning programme. The learners tend to dislike literature at this level because of the traditional method being adopted in the teaching of the subject coupled with the stigma attached to the subject and the difficulty inherent in the study of literary text. In some instances, the cumbersomeness or the volume of literary texts recommended for learners of the foreign language is sometimes considered a herculean task for the learners to handle. This singular idea sometimes creates disenchantment on the part of the learners to sustain their interest in the study of literature and thereby improve on their language skills.

There are several studies conducted to establish the relevance and significance of literature to language development of the foreign language learners. Belcher and Hirvela (2000), Hanauer (2001) and Kim (2004) discussed the use of literature as pedagogical tool in the teaching of English language as a foreign language. All these study emphasized the importance of integrating Literature into foreign language learning.

At the inception of introducing Literature into foreign language programme, the literary texts of renowned authors were always recommended for the primary aim of improving on the reading comprehension skills of the learners and for translation purposes. Attention is thereby focused on the surface level of the texts and vocabularies to the detriment of appreciation of literary value. Extensive use of the dictionary is hereby encouraged. Denka (2005) affirmed that the idea of referring to dictionary is a habit students need to imbibe.

The importance of Literature in foreign language learning cannot be measured. The advantages range from improvement of the communicative competence in the learners to development of critical thinking and aesthetic value (Bretz, 1990). It was affirmed that

introduction of Literature at the early stage of the foreign language programme in the university create a lot of difficulties for the learners because of their level of language competence. The first year of language learning could be rather devoted to intensive training in language and some components of culture. The second year should also focus attention on the continuation of language elements. The third year of language learning should incorporate the introduction or exposure to literary study which include dramas, Novels, short stories and poetry. Communicative approach to the teaching of literature encourages learners centered learning and inculcates the spirit of independent learning and critical and logical thinking in the learners.

However, Premawardena (2006) opines that the use of traditional method of teaching result into producing passive learners who only depend on the teachers for understanding and comprehension of the literary texts. Learners should be able to work independently of the teachers. The idea of relying on the lecture notes taken in the literature class without engaging in critical and logical thinking in the study of literacy texts are not considered good qualities that learners of foreign language should possess after long years of foreign language learning.

Traditional approach to literary study where the students make attempt to translate every word in the text will not be helpful in developing analytic and critical thinking in the learners. The contemporary approach to the study of literature in foreign language emphasizes oral and written communication skills. Learners should not be encouraged to rely on available critical works on the selected texts. Their own interpretation of the text with supportive argument and oral presentation of the critical analysis in form of exposé could be of help to the learners of foreign language. The learners need to be taught the historical and cultural values of the relevant speech community as this will serve as background information that will help them to understand the literature of the target speech community.

The survey conducted on second year students learning foreign language in the university prior to the introduction to literature, confirmed that students are reluctant to study Literature because of the language difficulty, lack of interest and fear of reading literary work. On the other hand, some students expressed optimism for studying literature, hinging their support for literary study on the pleasure of reading in a foreign language and learning about a new society.

Literature can be used as a technique in teaching basic language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening and other language areas such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The teaching of literature in the foreign language class could be seen as a pedagogical tool in teaching foreign language skills to the learners. The age long separation

between language and literature is the major contributory factor to the decline in the study of literature in the foreign language program. Teachers of foreign language tend to focus on teaching the standard forms of the language at the expense of the aesthetic value of the language.

In spite of these efforts, the learners still find it difficult to comprehend the nuances, creativity and versatility which characterize standard and transactional forms of language. The teacher should be rest assured that achieving communicative competence is the primary aim of teaching foreign language and this goes beyond mastery of structures and forms. The learners could be exposed to varied discourse types in the language i.e. expressive, transactional and poetic. Literature, apart from being regarded as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of a foreign language, also serves as authentic texts in the foreign language class. Some of the reasons why language teachers, course designers and examiners failed to incorporate literature into foreign language learning programme reside in the inaccessibility and complexity of literature to foreign language learners. Learners are versed in the mechanics of language. It is also believed that literature and literary language always deviate from conventions and rules which govern standard discourse i.e. the language of poetry where grammar and lexis are manipulated. Learners of foreign language need to go extra mile to construct meaning out of the literary text which is the function of their understanding of the socio-cultural values of the target language community.

Akyel and Yalcin (1990) highlights that the desire to broaden learners' horizons through exposure to classic literature usually has disappointing results. There is need on the part of the learners to reconstruct the meaning from the text while reading non – literary discourse such as transactional and expressive forms of writing.

The demarcation between literary and non-literary discourse is responsible for the age long separation between language and literature. Carter and McRae (1996) claimed that this divergence has resulted into the teaching of the two subjects as disconnected practices. Carter and Nash (1990) suggest that instead of separating the two language discourse, it could be said that some texts are more literary than the other.

There are models to be adopted in the teaching of literature in foreign language class. These models include cultural model, language model and the personal growth model. Cultural model which is traditional approach to teaching literature requires the learners to explore the social political, literary and historical context of a specific text. Language based approach allows the learners to approach the literary text systematically and methodically. EFL activities such as cloze procedure, prediction exercises, tumbled sentences, summary

writing, creative writing and role play form the bulk of activities engaged in by the EFL learners in language based approach. The personal growth model bridges the gap between the language model and the cultural model. The learners pay attention to the use of language in the text in the context of specific cultural belief and perspective. The learners reconstruct meaning from the text from their own cultural belief.

Duff and Maley (1990) gave three cogent reasons why literature should be integrated into the foreign language class which are linguistic, methodological and motivational reasons. The cognitive processes of the young learners are in tune with narrative process. Written literature give the learners insights into the target language culture thereby inculcating in them cultural competence which could help them to act competently when in contact with the native speakers of the target language.

Literature affords the learners the opportunity of access to life situations and authentic text which are not readily available in textbooks (Jonathan, 2003). There should be a justifiable reason for including literary study into the programme of foreign language. The study of foreign literatures such as Shakespeare and Dickens propagate cultural imperialism as claimed by some adherents of mother-tongue education. The inclusion and exclusion of literature in the foreign language programme could also be based on methodological reason. Literary texts that showcase real life situations and contemporary issues will be of immense benefit to the learners of foreign language in the area of linguistic competence and language development.

However, communicative approach to the teaching of foreign language does not lend itself to the teaching of literature because of its emphasis on speaking and listening skills. The teacher only plays the role of facilitator under this approach while the learners do the talking. This method has as its primary role, the development of communicative competence through the act of engaging the learners in communicative act. On the other hand, literary study in the foreign language class places much emphasis on reading and writing to the detriment of speaking and writing. In the study of literature in foreign language class, the teacher always play dominant role while the learners only remain passive trying to decode the interpretation and explanation given by the teacher on the selected text. Some people have argued that reading culture is becoming obsolete and fading out among young learners because of the emergence of new technologies taking much of the time that is supposed to be devoted to reading literature. This singular problem dealt a terrible blow on the essence of literature in foreign language classroom.

Jonathan (2003) researched extensively into the benefits and relative significance of literature in the foreign language classroom. Some of the advantages highlighted are cultural enrichment, linguistic model, mental training, authenticity, memorability, Rhythmic resource motivating material, open to interpretation, convenience.

Literature is said to have influence on the mind compared to any other discipline in the school system. The teacher is expected to be versatile in the use of materials for his or her teaching exercise. He or she should endeavor to use any materials he stumbles on. The difference between literary discourse and conventional discourse must be clear to the language teacher. In conventional discourse, the readers can guess or anticipate the subsequent events and as the events unfold. However, this is not discernible in literature because new evidences and realities are presented in the discourse. This gives room for the reader to adopt interpretative technique to analyze the text. This analogy places premium on the importance of literature in helping the learners to develop interpretative technique, a sound mind and thereby motivate the learners in foreign language learning.

Those who argued in favour of literature in language class claimed that language textbooks do not contain real communicative acts and authentic materials compared to literary text. The use of varieties of materials such as magazines and News papers could add value to the learning of foreign language if we consider the currency of these materials. Language textbooks, no matter their standard or value are subject to periodic review in order to measure up to current social realities and contemporary issues in the society. The use of literary texts of narrative type has been so useful at the lower level of the education i.e. the early childhood level. It was claimed that the cognitive ability of the young learners are adept to narrative discourse at this level. Kokkola (2002) supported this view while he tested the hypothesis that young language learners are likely to get on better with narrative than non-narrative texts. He further admitted that narrative texts should be strictly used amongst the young language learners because these texts present fewer learning difficulties to the learners and also give the learners the ample opportunity to construct meaning from the text they have read.

Foreign language learning and cultural competence

Cultural awareness and cultural competence have been considered as the factor responsible for the inclusion of literature in a foreign language programme. The learners are expected to be culturally competent while dealing with the representatives of the target language communities apart from having linguistic competence in the foreign language which is the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language. This idea does not suggest that learners

should abandon their own cultural identities or heritage in favour of the target language culture. One should exercise caution while dealing with the target language culture especially in this era when people are suspicious of the cultural imperialism or colonization most especially in the third world countries. Experts in the field of foreign language always see language and culture as an indivisible entity. It was reiterated that learning a foreign language translates to learning the culture of the target language community. The reason given for holding this view was that the learners need to gain cultural competence along side linguistic competence in order to be able to operate competently when in contact with the representatives of the second language community. This scenario gave birth to concepts such as mono-cultural, bi-cultural, monolingual and bilingual in second language learning. The relationship between language and culture should not be undermined. It has become a subject of debate among experts in foreign language teaching and learning. It was affirmed that someone can be competent in a language and be deficient in the foreign language culture. The pertinent question we may ask at this juncture is whether to lay emphasis on the culture of the metropolitan country or its former colonies. i.e. (France and Britain). There are quite a number of literary works written and published by prolific writers and literary giants in continents such as Africa, Asia and America.

For example Chinua Achebe of Nigeria wrote a number of literary pieces among which is "Things fall apart" which has been translated into over 50 languages of the world. Looking critically at some of the novels written by Achebe, the Igbo cultural beliefs and values permeated the length and breadth of his novels even though the novels were written English language. If we go by the popular saying that language and culture are interrelated and foreign language culture could be imbibed through the teaching and learning of language, then what is the place of British culture in the novels of Chinua Achebe? The same thing can be said of Wole Soyinka of Yoruba extract who wrote majority of his novels to propagate Yoruba culture. The picture painted above is not meant to cast aspersions on the literary personality of any writer but to unravel the myth in the acclaimed synergy between language and culture.

Looking critically at the teaching of French in the Nigeria tertiary institutions, one could observe the premium placed on the teaching of literature as part of the foreign language programme. The teaching of literature at this level is multi-dimensional. The literature of the metropolitan France, African francophone literature and Caribbean literature gain prominence in the foreign language programme. This special interest in literature is borne out of the desire of the foreign language curriculum developers to expose the learners to the culture of the

French people. However, with the varieties of literatures emanating from different cultural milieu in the French speaking countries of the world, the original intention of the curriculum developers is to expose the foreign language learners to the culture of the metropolitan France. This motive is defeated since the writers of these literary works are influenced by their own native culture which could be at variance with the culture of metropolitan France.

The teaching of French literature and examination syllabus

In the National Examination Council (NECO) syllabus of 2012, the aim of designing the syllabus for French language is to evaluate the learners' ability to use French language as a tool of communication by the end of their secondary school education. Language skills such as oral comprehension, oral expression, written comprehension and written expression are emphasized. These language skills are synonymous to the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The aspect of literary study has been totally removed from the syllabus. In lieu of the study of literary texts, students are expected to have a general knowledge of the culture and civilization of Nigeria and Francophone societies.

Taking a look at the National Examinations Council (NECO) syllabus of 2004-2006, the primary aim for introducing literature into the examination syllabus for candidates sitting for French language is for the candidates to have a detailed knowledge of all the texts selected for study to be able to answer questions on them. These texts cover the two divisions of literary studies i.e. Prose and Drama. The suggested literary texts in this syllabus are "le témoin" by Tunde Ajiboye, "Une we de Boy" by Ferdinand oyono, "La secrétaire particulière" by Jean Pliya and "L'avare" by Molière. Out of the above mentioned literary texts, the only text that originates from the metropolitan France is "L'avare by Molière". The remaining texts originate from both the Anglophone and Francophone West Africa countries. However, there is no gain saying the fact that the teaching of French culture through the medium of Literature in respect of these recommended texts of Anglophone and francophone origin may not be justifiable judging by the cultural biases and prejudices of the writers. Therefore, the fusion of language and culture should not be over-emphasized. Foreign language could be taught in isolation of the target language culture and civilization. The culture and civilization aspect of the foreign language programme can be presented in a separate course different from the language course. French language has diverse tongues and dialects, i.e. Parisian French, Canadian French and Belgian French just to mention a few. What is essential in the teaching of French language to the second language learners is to

inculcate communicative competence in the learners so that they would be able to function effectively when in contact with the representatives of the target language community.

Conclusion

We have succinctly considered the relative importance of literature in the foreign language programme. The two opposing views which state that literature should be incorporated into the foreign language programme and otherwise were carefully considered. One cannot under-estimate the significance of literature in foreign language learning especially in the area of communicative competence, cultural competence and motivation in the foreign language class. What is essential in the foreign language curriculum is the realization of language competence in the learners irrespective of the culture emanating from the selected literary texts. Language is dynamic and varies from society to society. Communicative competence is the goal of foreign language learning while cultural competence is secondary. Foreign language (especially French) teachers should avail themselves of the use of journals, newspapers, magazines and novels as authentic materials in the foreign language teaching and learning instead of relying entirely on grammar or comprehension books that demand periodic review to meet up with socio-cultural realities in the society.

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