

## MODERN STRATEGIES IN PROSE LITERATURE PEDAGOGY

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses some of the modern strategies in Prose Literature pedagogy. It emphasizes that any useful method of teaching should be based on the modern theory of learning which places the child at the center of the teaching/learning activity; and that the teacher, in the choice of methods, should bear in mind several variables including: the nature of the learners, the objective of the teaching programme, the learning environment, etc.*

### Introduction:

The concern in this paper is not so much about the meaning and the usefulness of Literature as it is about the modern methods in teaching it, especially prose Literature. A brief overview of what Literature is and how it relates to our life will however, help us to appreciate the need for virile and effective methods of teaching it. At a general level, people refer to any material in written form as Literature. So, we have medical literature, relating to medicine; socio-linguistic literature, relating to socio-linguistics; religious literature; relating to religion, and so on and so forth. Literature in this sense refers to any written material including letters, compositions and reports. This meaning of Literature is perhaps from the etymology of the word, which is the Latin word "literare" meaning to write. The concern in this paper transcends the meaning of Literature in this ordinary sense to Literature as a technical term meaning any work of art in the established genres of prose, poetry and drama. In this latter sense, Literature is very much part of our everyday life and it has social values. Such values include: educational, entertainment, didactic and therapeutic functions. Literature is also a repository and propagator of culture and it is also useful as an instrument of propaganda. Detailed explanation of each of these values of Literature falls outside the purview of this paper. The mere mention of these values strengthens the rationale behind writing a paper on modern methods in the teaching of Literature, particularly prose Literature.

Early teaching methods were highly teacher-centered and Literature teaching suffered the same fate with other subjects. Students grappled with texts

and made copious memorization of passages as the essence of literary study. But thanks to emergent learning theories that insist on a child-centered or learner centered method of teaching. It is now discovered that Literature learning is not just a matter of rote learning. The Literature class can be made interesting enough for children in this generation of a fast moving world. This paper is specifically on prose Literature; it is not as though there may be no overlapping with other genres of literature. But there is enough clear distinction among prose, poetry and drama as to warrant devoting attention to each of the genres.

In terms of language for example, prose is very close to the ordinary language of interpersonal interactions while poetry is highly condensed and concise. The language of drama may be prosaic or poetic, but it has the distinction of making use of dialogue. Also, prose is usually wider in thematic scope than drama or poetry. Of the three, poetry is least ambitious thematically. In terms of literary elements like "story," "sound device" or "figurative language" in general, prose differs from the other two genres in that it relies more on the elements of "story" and "character" than the others (NTI, 1990). Drama puts more emphasis on "dialogue" and "action" while poetry is more concerned with the figurative use of language as well a sound and rhythm. As has been pointed out, there could be overlapping but the distinction is clear enough to justify specialized attentions.

One more thing to include in this introduction is the point that prose fiction as a genre of Literature has its own sub-genres. These are the novel, the novella and the short-story. The difference among the three is more in terms of thematic scope. While the short story is the least ambitious, the novel covers the widest scope and the novella mediates between the short-story and the novel. The novel is more of our focus in this paper as it is the most common in recommended texts especially for Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (S. S. C. E).

### **The teaching of prose Literature**

As has been hinted in the introduction, the theoretical base of modern teaching methods is that (unlike in the past when the teacher was the pivot around which classroom activities revolved) emphasis has shifted to the child. The most important thing for the teacher now is for him to provide facilities with which students or learners can learn on their own, whether in groups or individually (Olaoye, 2004). For the teacher of Literature, such facilities that he would provide is likely to be affected by his perception of the ultimate goal of Literature. Lawal (1997) suggests that:

the ultimate goal of Literature is to affect us cognitively, affectively and psychometrically so that we respond to life from a more profound perspective, with language being a necessary but insufficient tool for accomplishing this (p. vi).

This requires that the teacher of prose Literature X-rays the entire novel so that the students become mindful of its theme, plot, setting, characters, and language use. For this purpose, it becomes necessary for the teacher to make sure that his students are the more active participators in the teaching / learning experience.

Other crucial issues for the teacher to be mindful of include: the nature of the learners; their socio-cultural background, including their psycholinguistic and socio-linguistic traits. The environment in which the teaching is being done is also important. Of important consideration for the prose Literature teacher is the fact that his students are not just reading for leisure or for cultural awareness. There is a terminal assessment, which is of paramount importance to the students. It is their performance in Literature at the end of their course that determines whether or not they would qualify to read Law or Mass communication in the University. Thus the teacher's methods should be informed also by what level of linguistic and literary competencies are expected of the students by examiners.

One should then agree with Olaoye (2004) that the Literature teacher should have "sound professional skills and experience" (p. 118). It is the teacher who has enough knowledge of psychological theories of learning that will be able to provide the conducive atmosphere for effective teaching and learning. Such teachers will not find it difficult in bringing about innovations that may later become of wider acceptability in the teaching and learning of Literature. The essence of what has been said thus far is that the method the teacher of prose Literature will adopt is a factor of many things. Therefore, some of the methods that will be discussed here are merely suggestive.

### **The Question Method**

The topic of this paper;: "Modern strategies in prose Literature pedagogy" is somewhat presumptuous in that bringing innovations into and elevating old methods is not an indication of such methods being irrelevant. It is the path of wisdom not to throw away the baby with the bathwater. The question method is as old as Socrates. Its application in prose teaching, however, has witnessed innovations that make it relevant in the current concept of prose Literature pedagogy. While teaching, the teacher may make use of pre-planned and spontaneous questions. Even when the questions are pre-planned, the teacher is

expected to be open and flexible. Some of the guiding objectives that will help the teacher in the question method include: the talents he means to develop in the students, the critical thinking process he means to nurture, and the subject matter objectives he means to develop (NTI, 1990). The understanding of the classification of questions based on Bloom's taxonomy may be relevant to the teacher in this regard.

The question method, to be effective in the teaching of prose Literature, requires a lot of professionalism. For example, the teacher himself must be trained in avoiding multiple questions and in not over reacting when the students supply answers rightly or wrongly. He should know how to help his students against overgeneralizations. He should know when and how to help his students out of constrictive thinking, etc. The effective question method of teaching prose Literature is an art that requires training on the part of the teacher.

#### **The Role Play Method**

Asking students to simulate or play roles they have read about in a novel, say: *Things Fall Apart*, will not only arouse their interest but also help them to have some permanent impressions of the important episodes. For instance, it is possible to ask a student to play the role of Ezeudu and another that of Okonkwo in the episode where the latter strongly advises the former: "That boy calls you father... Bear no hand in his death" (P.84).

#### **The Drama Method**

The drama method is very much applicable in prose teaching. In this, students take up roles of characters and are asked to stage play such roles. This helps a lot in helping the students to develop some level of linguistic competence. The students will be able to perform better if they have been made to watch Chinua Achbe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, on the TV. The teacher himself or a student or group of students may script a short play based on certain themes or episodes in a novel.

#### **The Discussion Method**

Instead of the teacher doing the job of reading alone, he could allow students to read chapters of novels from home and when they come to the class break them into groups and assign relevant tasks to each group where they could discuss characters, themes literary styles, etc. depending on the teacher's purpose or objective. The management of such discussion groups requires professional knowledge on the part of the teacher.

### Cultural Relativism

What is referred to here as cultural relativism has to do with the teacher's effort to link the students' cultural setting with what obtains in the novel being treated in the class. The passage below, for example, suggests the Ibo's belief in super-natural forces.

And now the rains had really come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it in the heart of the dry season, without serious danger to his own health. The personal dynamism required countering the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame (P. 24).

The teacher of Literature at G. S. S. Idofin in Oke Ero Local Government Area, Kwara State who wants to take his lesson of Things Fall Apart from here could start with these songs:

A a ridi okun a a yayin osa; saniyan nmo ja ya yin  
re o (You cannot fathom the depth of the sea; the  
lagoon is also inexhaustible; Saniyan spring [a  
deity] should not allow us to know its secrets).

Then he follows that closely with;

Saniyan bo mi ko mi o  
Mo to bo mi ko o  
(Saniyan, give me water  
I am due for it).

These songs are sung when Saniyan spring as a deity is approached to help interfere supernaturally when the rains are delayed at the beginning of a raining season. Although in reality, on the day of appeasement, there could be a down pour and sometimes the day could be the driest in the year, relating the students' immediate cultural experience with what obtains in the novel helps to arouse interest as well as enhance the understanding of the cultural setting of the novel.

### **Team Teaching**

Although this is not specific to the teaching of prose Literature or even Literature in general, team teaching can be very much valuable to the prose Literature teacher and students. Teachers from other schools could be invited as resource persons to handle some aspects of the teaching. Where possible, the writer of the novel may be invited to give hints as to situations surrounding theme, setting and characterization. The advantage of this over the teacher's just dictating notes on theme, plot, setting and characterization is inestimable.

### **Language Related Teaching**

It was hinted earlier that the study of Literature has several important values and one of them is that it vitalizes language. There are students who study Literature in order to improve their language proficiency; particularly now a days that it takes a Credit Pass in English to get admitted into the University. And this requirement is not limited to Nigeria.

According to Torbe (1981) about half a million candidates of ethnic minorities in Britain sat for O' level English Language examinations in the summer of 1981. The largest percentage of them failed and this was discovered to be a reflection of persistent occurrence. The concern about such persistent failure grew to the point that 'a working party of teachers from Coventry wrote to the Vice-chancellors of all British Universities' (p.29) asking why a pass in O' level English Language should be considered necessary by those who require it. The thirty replies received indicated that English was not only required by Universities but also by employers. The idea is that there is a need to test a person's level of competence in the language used either for learning or for work. Such level of competence could be an index to a learner's or a worker's success.

Thus adopting a methodology of prose Literature teaching in order to enhance students' mastery of language skills has immense advantages. In the first place, literature is language in action; and it is in this sense alone that it is relevant to teach English Language and English Literature intergratedly. In teaching the oracy skills through prose Literature, the teacher can divide members of the class into pairs or groups and have them discuss in dialogues through the dramatization of episodes. The class may be organized into debate groups and topics of debate may center on themes, character and even stylistic features. Inherently, the study of prose Literature enhances the reading skills, as it is impossible to study a novel without reading it. However, the teacher of prose Literature can methodologically help students to improve on their reading skills not only by being a model reader to them but also by teaching them to read passages at different levels: literal.

inferential or evaluative. And by the time the teacher subjects the students to write copiously on different aspects of the novel, he will be promoting their writing skill.

### **The Non-print Method**

The prose Literature teacher has non-print materials to teach his students. There are now video films of novels like Things Fall Apart which the students may be privileged to watch before, during and after the treatment of the novel in the class. There are many educational radio programmes meant for primary and secondary school learners today. Although these programmes may not be run at a period students are available to listen to them, they could be recorded on cassettes to be relayed to students in the class. The pre-recording of model readings of prose passages may be done by teachers. When these are played back to the students, the teacher himself is relieved of constant reading in the class.

Apart from the use of the radio and the television, the teacher has the advantage of teaching prose Literature through co-curricular activities as are done by the Literary and Debating Society, the Press Club and the Dram Club. Themes, characters and styles could be used as topics of debate, the press club may encourage the writing of journalistic features on fictional characters and episodes just as members of the Drama Club may be challenged to translate fictional texts into plays and act them on the stage (NTI, 1990).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Several methods of teaching prose Literature have been advanced. This is not to say that all methods have been discussed; this is because human knowledge is expanding daily and learning theories still remain in a flux. Acceptable theories today may be improved upon or may even be discarded tomorrow. Besides, a good teacher will think of the method to use based on the nature of the students, the teaching/learning conditions, the curricular objective of the course of study, the time within his disposal and other several variables. The issue of which method to adopt is like the lingering debate about technique and content in literary criticism. It is believed by some that content is more important than technique. Some insist that technique should be seen as being of more importance than the content of a work of art. In any case, it is understood that to talk of content alone is not to talk of art. And to talk of technique alone is not to talk of art. The relationship between the two is to be seen as highly dialectical as Bunyan says about the Pilgrim's Progress:

if any ask why I doth allegorize, I answer, the text doth lead me to it (Offers, 1920: p. 558).

That same principle should guide the teacher of prose Literature. The novel, the students, and other relevant variables should determine the method to use. This has several implications:

1. Teachers of prose literature should be professionals.
2. Teaching aids should be made available to the teachers.
3. The dichotomy in the WAEC/NECO SSCE syllabus on Literature should be discouraged, not only for the teacher's sake, but also for the sake of parents who have many books to buy for their children/wards and even for the sake of students who have many books to read in preparation for SSCE. If there is no dichotomy in the English Language, Physics, Mathematics Or Chemistry syllabus, then that of Literature is unnecessary and it only amounts to academic hypocrisy.
4. With all the inexhaustible methods of teaching at the disposal of the prose Literature teacher, he/she should exploit possibilities within his/her disposal in the interest of the students. Although this could be highly demanding, prose Literature teaching is not for the lazy teacher either.
5. It is time for Government to appreciate the value of teachers and of Literature teachers in particular. Fiddling with the profesionalization of teaching in Nigeria is demonstrating that we are contented with remaining a developing nation. No Nation ever rises above the quality of her teachers.

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