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Literary Texts as Language Teaching Aids

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Literary Texts as Language Teaching Aids

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Abstract- This work is divided into six parts. The first part is the introduction which throws light on the relationship between language and literature and points out the aspects of language that literary text can be used to teach. The second part: teaching comprehension passages, attempts to show that both comprehension and literary studies require critical thinking. It is pointed out in the third part: teaching of composition, that in good literary works are expository, narrative, and descriptive passages, which can be used to teach composition. The discussion in part four shows how useful literary texts can be in the teaching and learning of lexis and structure. Part five is the presentation of the result of the use of descriptive passages from the two novels used to teach descriptive writing in GNS101 class. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations part rounds off the discussion with suggestions on how students can improve in descriptive writing. It has been discovered that literary texts are useful materials for language teaching and learning.

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I. Introduction

The dearth of language teaching aids in our schools today cannot be overemphasized. Literature is an application of language and the best teaching materials for the latter are literary texts. Literature and language have many things in common because the former is a manifestation of the latter. Anyone who is dealing with literature should know that he is dealing with language as well. Passages extracted from literary works are usually good materials for comprehension exercises.

Writing has techniques which writers have used to produce good literary works. So, in literature, there are texts that language teachers can use to teach different styles of writing. Writers have a good command of the language they use to write literary works, therefore, every literary text is a good material that can improve students' knowledge of language.

Reading literary works increases learners' vocabulary a great deal and improves their knowledge of sentence construction. We come across, in literary works, uses of punctuation marks and other aspects of language. When appropriate texts/extracts are chosen, bearing in mind some criteria, difficulties that are always encountered in the teaching and learning of language will surely reduce.

It is to point out that this study is an endeavour in the area of interdisciplinary studies. It falls under pedagogical stylistics which Ogunsiji (2011:33) observed is the type of stylistics that shows the instructional use into which stylistics is put. He quotes Wales who opined that stylistics has been unarguably, considered a teacher's ready tool of teaching language and literature to both native and foreign speakers of English (cited in Ogunsiji, 2011:33). It has also been noted that pedagogical stylistics is a close ally of classroom discourse analysis. Features of language in literary works are useful materials for language teaching and learning.

II. Teaching Comprehension Passages

Passages from literary texts are good materials for comprehension lessons. A literary text seeks to convey a massage, which is understood through the writer's use of language and style of writing. Critical reading is required to understand the author's massage and answer questions on a text. Therefore, a passage from a literary text serves the purpose for which comprehension work in a language classroom is designed. Comprehension exercises require different forms of performance, which could be inferential, lexical, factual information, critical interpretation and evaluation. Comprehension according to Olaofe (1993: 44). "Demands not only a thorough understanding of the passage, but also the ability to interpret the stated and unstated author's intentions, as well as passing value judgments."

The view expressed by Olaofe on comprehension studies is applicable to literary studies which involve reading between lines. Learners are required to use their intuition to give answers not overtly stated in the text.

As pointed out by Collie and Slater (1987:5):

> The extensive reading required in tackling a novel or long play develops the students' ability to make inferences from linguistic clues and to deduce meaning from context, both useful tools in reading other sorts of materials as well

Introducing language learners to literary texts will develop their ability to make inference. Some comprehension passages require the skill indentified by Collie and Slater which shows a closely knitted relationship between comprehension and literary texts. The analogy drawn here justifies the use of literary texts for comprehension lessons.

The technique that literature teachers use to teach the subject is useful in comprehension lessons in the language classroom. Learners of English language should be made to read literary texts with questions on

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them in order to improve their performances in comprehension exercise.

Evaluative and interpretative comprehension questions in English language are open-ended like questions on literary works, which have no one main or fixed answer. Literary studies require critical thinking. Some comprehension exercises are equally like this. This is why Grant, Nnamonu, and Jowitt (1998:18) wrote that reading comprehension passages for critical evaluation requires the ability to comment on how the author presents his or her ideas. It also involves understanding the writer's purpose, intention or point of view. This task can easily be tackled if learners are introduced to literary works.

The training of literature according to Bolaji and Alabi (1994:259) is to develop a critical mind that can evaluate and sift the grain from the chaff. This skill is useful for the comprehension exercise. In language lessons, passages from literary texts as well as write-ups with literary background help to develop sharp and acute minds. As stated by Oluikpe, Nnaemeka, Emeka,Elsie and Onuigbo (1997:197)"…not every comprehension exercise is a test. Rather, the exercise should be regarded as activities designed to develop different thinking and reasoning skills".

What Oluipke, et al have stated here is also the domain of literary studies. Literary works as well as some comprehension works are designed to develop learners' intellect, and answers to questions on them show the learners' level of intelligence. By and large, the similarities between literary texts and comprehension studies show that the best materials for comprehension exercises are literary texts.

III. Teaching of Composition

Every literary work is a written composition in which the author has employed the techniques of writing. Therefore, in good literary works are expository, narrative, and descriptive passages, which can be used to teach essay writing. In Read's (1994: 116-117) *English Prose Style*_an excerpt from Henry Fielding's *Adventures of Joseph Andrews*_is used to illustrate a narrative style of writing. According to Aiyenigba, Yakubu, Otaru and Balagbogbo (2002:28),

> A paragraph contains an idea, which is an aspect of the main topic of the essay. Sentences in a paragraph contribute to the development of the idea, which the paragraph is all about.

In a paragraph, there must be unity and coherence. Sentences that do not contribute to the idea, which the paragraph is all about should not be included. It should be understood that the structure of a paragraph is similar to the structure of an essay.

In literary works, there are paragraphs that can be used as models of paragraph writing. Read (1994:70) Commented on a passage he extracted from D. H. Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy* that:

> …the unity of the paragraphs is no less intact,… Each paragraph opens with an action of the old spinning woman; almost as invariably it closes with a reflection of, or concerning the narrator.

In a good expository paragraph there should be a main idea which is introduced in the topic sentence and which is developed by other sentences known as sentence developers to be rounded off by the last sentence called restatement sentence.

Chinua Achebe is one of the writers whose style of writing can be useful for composition teaching. As observed by Cook (1977:77):

> …there always is in good writing, a "key" sentence in every paragraph either at the beginning announcing the subject which is then developed in the body of that particular paragraph, or at the end to bring together the points that have been raised… Achebe has adopted in *Things Fall Apart* a style which is tightly trussed up and carefully modulated; and to suit his purpose, he has employed a rather more formalized conception of the paragraph.

Cook has pointed out the rule of paragraph development which Achebe has complied with. This is very important in writing a good paragraph and an essay. In *Things Fall Apart,* there are many descriptive passages that can serve as models of composition. In the novel are paragraphs that contain sentences which are in harmony with one another to discuss or deal with one aspect of the main topic.

Another technique of writing a good composition is logical arrangement of ideas or events in the narrative. Points have to be arranged in natural order so that ideas can flow for coherence and good understanding. Every good literary work complies with this. In Achebe's and Ngugi's novels are accounts of events that are in chronological order. Other good examples abound in the works of other writers.

Descriptive writing is a task which students face in their language lessons. In literary works are copious descriptive passages that teachers can use to teach descriptive essay. Read (1994:118) wrote of Jane Austen that: "the characteristics, indeed, 0f her style are rather those of the essayist. The action is reduced to a minimum, and the mind turns instead to analysis, to decoration (scene-painting)…"

In Jane Austin's novels are vivid description 0f places, situations, and characters. Her novels can be used to make students easily grasp the knowledge of descriptive writing.

There are many aspects of language in literature, which researchers have appreciated. Collie and Slater (1987:4) stated that "In reading literary texts, students… gain additional familiarity with many different

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linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration and so on.

Literature has a lot to contribute to the studies of language because it is language applied. There will be a lot of improvement in the language class if literary texts are utilized for language teaching.

IV. Vocabulary Development and Sentence Construction

Literary texts give learners the opportunity to acquire more vocabulary. As they come across new words in various contexts, these words will add to their repertoire of words.

Collie and Slater (1987:) points out that:

> Literature provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextualized body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language.

Literary texts can be read after which sentences are picked out to illustrate different sentence types. The way words are used together with how various sentences are constructed in the text will help in the mastery of Lexis and structure.

Fowler (177: 23) observed that novels are like sentences, which are coding of experience. Their basic structural categories have a lot in common with the elements of sentence structure. A novel is written in sentences. It is like a continuous piece of writing, such as an essay, which is composed in sentences. A writer is proficient in a language, which he uses to write. In novels and short stories, writers have demonstrated useful techniques of written language.

If a complete novel is not possible to be read to teach different aspects of language because of limited time, excerpts that are appropriate for certain aspects can be taken.

Assignments should be given so that learners are encouraged to read complete works on their own. This will definitely improve their performance in their language class. According to Bolaji and Alabi (1994:258),

> Literature improves our standard of English by providing new opportunities for learning new idioms and expressions. Literature provides ample opportunities for extensive use of language devices, and a lover of literature will not only pick up fresh and useful expressions in English, but he will also come across the intricate, but correct use of words to construct sentences.

Other aspects of language like the use of punctuation marks, register, code-switching, direct speech, etc. can be well imparted by using literary texts. Literary texts are demonstrations of the possibilities, ability, flexibility, and workings of language and therefore, they provide great opportunities for learners of a language to master the language.

a) Passages from Novels and the Teaching of Composition in Gns101 Class

In the syllabus for GNS 101: Use of English for National Diploma one students of Nigerian Polytechnics, there is a portion on paragraphing. Both the paragraph and essay are forms of composition with the same method of development. Experience has shown that many students find paragraph writing as well as essay-writing very difficult.

At the beginning of the First Semester of 2003/2004 academic session, the following questions were given as class work.

- In a paragraph, describe Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja.
- Write a paragraph entitled: "How to Prepare My Favourite Food"

At the end of the exercise, 40 scripts were randomly selected to be marked; the remaining 203 scripts were marked but not recorded. The mark distribution is as follows:

Content: $4^{1/2}$ marks, expression: $2^{1/2}$ marks, organization: $1^{1/2}$ marks, mechanical accuracy (M/A) $1^{1/2}$ marks, total: 10 marks.

When the scripts were marked, the scores are as shown below:

Score	No. of Student	Percentage
5-10	0	0%
4-$4^{1/2}$	9	22.5%
3-$3^{1/2}$	10	25%
2-$2^{1/2}$	14	35%
0-$1^{1/2}$	7	17.5%
Total	40	100%

This result shows that many students have a poor knowledge of writing. The forty students used as guinea pigs are a good representation of the entire class because none out of the remaining 203 is outstanding.

To improve in their writing skill, descriptive passages were earmarked to be read in the class. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*_and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *Petals of Blood*_were used for this purpose. These two novels were recommended more so, as literature is an aspect of GNS 101. One of the passages from *Things Fall Apart*_used as a model of descriptive composition is:

> Obierika's compound was as busy as an anti-hill. Temporary cooking tripods were erected on every available space by bringing together three blocks of sun-dried earth making a fire in their midst. Cooking

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pots went up and down the tripods, and foo-foo was pounded in a hundred mortars. Some of the women cooked yams and cassava, and others prepared vegetable soup…(Achebe 1986: 78-9).

The purpose of descriptive work is to present a picture in words for a good knowledge of or information on what has been described. While reading a composition like that quoted above, readers can visualize the action going on in their minds' eyes.

Below is a description of a process and it is one of the passages from *Petals of Blood* used.

She mixed the crunched millet seedlings with fried maize flour and put the mixture in a clay pot, slowly adding water and stirring. She covered its mouth with the mouth of yet another pot through which she had bored a hole. A bamboo pipe was fixed into the hole and its other end put in a sealed jar over which she placed a small basin of cold water. Then she sealed every possible opening with cowdung and when she had finished, she stood back to survey her work of art and science. *(*wa Thiong'o :206*).*

A good descriptive composition involves step by step explication of the thing or action being focused. A person, a thing, a place, an event, an action, and a process can be described. To do this successfully requires the knowledge of writing techniques as employed by the novelist whose works are cited here.

The reading of these passages in the class was accompanied by an explanation of the technique of descriptive writing. Before the First Semester Examination, another class work on the descriptive composition was given. The same number as well as the method of random selection was maintained. The result is as displayed below:

Score	No. of Student	Percentage
7-10	0	0%
6-6$^{1/2}$	4	10%
5-5$^{1/2}$	6	15%
4-4$^{1/2}$	10	25%
3-3$^{1/2}$	14	35%
2-2$^{1/2}$	4	10%
0-1$^{1/2}$	2	5%
Total	40	100%

The reason for improvement in the performance of students in this class is because models of descriptive composition were used from the two novels to teach descriptive writing.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

That literary texts are good teaching materials is obvious. Literature exposes students to the range and use of language. Many aspects of language abound in literary works. However, before choosing a text to use in a language classroom, teachers should bear in mind certain criteria like the language, learners' interests, cultural background, and the message conveyed by the literary work. In such a text, there should be linguistic features that can facilitate language teaching to improve learners' knowledge of language.

It should be noted that some students have the idea but lack the knowledge of the techniques of writing. Literary texts demonstrate these techniques, which can develop their writing skill. While reading a novel or passages from it to teach composition writing, Teaching should point out the techniques used by the writer to develop the central idea.

Furthermore, the text to be chosen should be carefully studied to ensure it has the linguistic features that are useful in language teaching and learning. Copies of the text to use should not only be available but easy to get from bookshops. Teachers can also type out and distribute to students for use in class excerpts from literary texts that demonstrate aspects of language.

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