



## Literature Circles: a Paradigm Shift In Literature Pedagogy In the Second Language Classroom

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### Introduction

Language arts teachers are devising new ways of presenting learning contents to learners, who are adjudged to have disconnected with the act of reading. Evidence of disengagement in reading is documented in literature. For instance, A publication of the American National Endowment for the Arts (2007) titled: To Read or Not to Read: A question of National Consciousness cited in Rutherford et al (2009) indicates that 'young adults are reading fewer books generally... while nearly half of all Americans ages 18-24 do not read books for pleasure, and less than one third of 13 year olds are daily readers. A similar view is held about Nigerian readers. Unoh (1995) observes that one of the problems of lack of reading improvement in Nigeria is traced to the high incidence of reluctant reading and learning syndrome in all levels of the education system. Similarly, Olaofe (1988) observes that the educational system is highly examination oriented ... the Nigerian environment does not promote reading for pleasure, only about 16.43% of literate Nigerian adults are reading.

Most Nigerian students are poor readers, they do not read for pleasure, sometimes they are even forced to read for the purpose of passing examinations. Basically, students and majority of the Nigerian literates have relapsed into what Beers (2003) described as 'the state of allitracy', meaning they can read but choose not to read. In this era of globalization and development in information technology, a large volume of information is made available on daily basis through various media, however, students lack the reading skills required to access and benefit from this quantum of information. The negative attitude to reading witnessed among Nigerian students in such magnitude pose serious problems for those who study literature in English in Nigerian second language classroom.

### Teaching Literature in Nigerian Schools

Literature in English, particularly in Nigeria, is studied for various purposes by different grades of readers. Generally, it is a source material for the development of literacy skills and the basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. For beginning and intermediate readers, literature serves as the avenue for students to practice skills learnt in the language classroom. On the other hand, advanced readers explore the world of the literary text for the opportunity of pleasurable reading, for the development of the mind and other vicarious experiences.

However, the average Nigerian secondary school student hardly reads the recommended literature text. The West African Examination Council (WAEC), a body responsible for the conduct of state wide examination for senior secondary school students in West African sub-region in its various reports for Nigeria (20004; 2005; 2007) note that students lack the necessary skills required to read and appreciate literature texts. Specifically, students' responses to the questions asked show absolute lack of knowledge of content, implying either that those students lacked the required skill to interpret the questions or they did not read the selected texts resulting to the inappropriate and shallow answers they gave to the questions. The reports further explain that students' answers to questions show a heavy reliance on teachers' notes and summary of texts, indicating that students are passive listeners who expect teachers to be active providers of input during literature instruction. This negative habit extends into the tertiary institutions and continues to affect students' attitude to reading throughout life. Besides, literature teaching is lopsided in favour of examination as teachers and students tend to ignore content areas not usually tested by the examination (Ezeokoli 2002). Even among University students, Jegede (2010) observes that they do not want to read selected literary text ...instead they prefer teacher's note over the reading of the text itself. Ike (1993) cited in Jegede (2010) also attributes students' reluctance to read recommended texts to the fact that Nigeria does not have a reading culture but an oral culture. Changing from oral culture to book culture would require a sustained reconditioning of our consciousness to appreciate the indispensability of books to our overall well being and turn us into book lovers.

Ike's submission presupposes a total change in attitude to reading, realized through a holistic restructuring of the reading programme in schools and communities. Jegede (2010) proposes a programme which would involve establishment of book clubs, organization of public reading, reading competitions, workshops and seminars that would involve the whole society, especially teachers and parents. Jegede's proposal resonates the call to total break from the traditional teacher centred approaches in the teaching of literature to child centred and collaborative approaches which encourage the use of teaching strategies that promote community based reading and sharing of ideas in the literature classroom.



## **Theoretical Background**

One good example of such approaches is Rosenblatt's reader response approach, predicated on the transactional relationship that exists between the reader and the text. In approaching the text, the reader brings his/her personal experiences, feelings, opinions and the totality of what makes the reader human to bear on the interpretation of the text. Rosenblatt's approach challenges dominant traditional classroom practices in the teaching of literature or literary text by emphasizing instructional strategies that give students the opportunity to live through or experience the literary text than having just a mere recall of the information contained in the text. In Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1994), interaction during the reading process becomes mutual. Hence, constructing meaning from the text becomes a function of mutual respect because it is believed that reading is transactional and meaning is not just found in the text or a reader's head but in the transaction between the text and the reader (Clark and Howadel 2007). Individuals may read the same text and come out with different transaction and or meaning because they approach the text from their different peculiar experiences (Rosenblatt 1994, 1995). Besides, Rosenblatt's reader response theory promotes independent and community based reading structure and forms the theoretical background to the popularization of literature circles in the Language Arts American classrooms.

## **Literature Circles**

Literature circles is a practice that combines the features of cooperative learning and independent reading skills in reading and sharing ideas about literary texts. According to Ruthford et al (2009) 'many students do not read so it behooves teachers to utilize instructional practices that promote reading for pleasure and at the same time engage students in meaningful and thoughtful reading. One exciting instructional strategies that encourage active participation in literary text in a meaningful and enjoying manner is literature circles. Literature circles has been described as 'a group of connected, competent readers who read for a personally meaningful purpose (Moller 2004/2005); or a group which 'brings students together for an indepth discussion on a work of fiction or non-fiction' (Fountas and Pinnel 2001) and it has been found to increase students' enjoyment and engagement of text (McElvain 2005; Lehman 2007; Ruthford et al 2009)

Ideal literature circles involve small temporary groups of students who chose to read the same text, meet regularly to discuss their reading, assumes specific but rotational roles as they prepare for the discussion. When a text is completed, groups find ways to communicate their discussion to other classmates and then they form new groups around new books (Daniels 2002:18). Literature circles is a student driven strategy which places students at the centre of instruction by giving them opportunity to take ownership of their learning through freedom to choose what to read; how to read; when and where to read. Students share and discuss chosen texts in social groups. Hence, power and control are taken from teachers and given to students thereby 'disrupting and destabilizing the traditional teacher – centred literacy practices' (Holly 2010). This study examines practices in literature pedagogy in some second language classrooms in Nigeria vis-à-vis the principles and practice of literature circles in language arts classrooms.

## **Procedure**

An adaptation of the classroom interaction analysis sheet developed by Okpala and Onocha (1988), with an intra and inter-rater reliability value ranging from .81 to .91 was used to observe actual literature teaching in ten (6) senior secondary schools within Abeokuta metropolis, South Western Nigeria. The behaviour categories focused on include: individual student work, student group work, teacher activity, whole class work,. This sheet was used to code specific teacher and students' behaviours that occurred every five minutes during the lesson. Senior secondary (1-3) classes were observed because it is only in these classes that serious teaching of literature occurs. Therefore two literature classes from each of the three streams of senior classes were randomly selected and observed for two periods per week, bringing the total number of observations to 12 in 6 weeks.



## Results and Discussions

Table 1: A tabular presentation of the 40 minutes classroom observation in each selected class

Lesson period	CATEGORIES OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES			
	Individual. Student. Work	Student, Group Work	Teacher activity	Whole Class work
SS1 1 2	Silent reading, vocal reading	-	Reading/explanation, Questioning/Assigns chapters to read at home	Silent/Vocal Reading, chorus answers, Copying teacher's notes
	Same	Same	Same	Same
SS1 1 2	Vocal reading	-	Same	Same
	Silent/vocal reading	-	Same	-
SS2 1 2	Students read silently/explains to whole class/ vocal reading	-	Reads, explains, asks questions & makes textual connections/assigns chapters to read at home	Silent reading/chorus answers
	Silent reading/vocal reading	-	Reads/explains, asks questions/ assigns chapters to read at home	Same
SS2 1 2	Same	-	Same	Same
	Vocal reading, explains portions read to whole class	-	Same	
SS3 1 2	Silent/vocal reading, makes personal responses	-	Asks questions, explains scaffolds learning, and makes connections. 9-SS3	Same
	Gives summaries of chapters read at home, silent/vocal reading	-	Reads, explains, asks questions, gives assignment on past question paper.	Discusses past question paper
SS3 1 2	Silent,vocal reading, summarizes	-	Same	Same
	Students were asked to briefly write down the themes in the text read	-	Gives further explanations on the themes through textual illustration	Same

## Discussion

Results on the table indicate that the method and strategy which teachers use in teaching literature in all the classes observed are basically the same, irrespective of grade level. Except on few occasions, the strategies include:

- Silent and vocal reading
- Summary of the chapters read either by the teacher or by individual students
- Explanations
- Use of teachers' questions
- Discussion of past examination questions.

It was observed that students were not involved in any form of group activity. Whole class work was limited to silent reading, chorus answers and copying of teachers' notes. It's only in SS 3 classes where students were being prepared for the national examination that teachers attempted to involve students in some form of written response



and discussion of past examination papers. It is obvious that teachers do not encourage students' active participation, personal response, collaborative group discussion and critical thinking skills. This is contrary to Literature circles practices, which emphasizes students' choice and personal response to literature. These factors were identified as obstacles to literature circles practices in the classroom:

- Curriculum overload
- Poor attitude to reading
- Lack of students' exposure to variety of texts
- Overcrowded classroom
- Poor teacher knowledge of best practices in literature pedagogy.

Therefore, it's important to train second language teachers in current global and innovative methodologies that promote active students' participation in literature discussion as well as a holistic attitudinal change to reading.

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