

Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of Literature-in-English for Enhancing Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the numerous acclaimed benefits of literature-in-English on language learning, this study seeks to determine whether the teaching and learning of Literature-in-English can enhance students' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. It would also ascertain the reasons for the decline in students' enrolment. The study used the survey research method and the sample was made up of 100 purposively selected senior secondary class two literature students drawn from four randomly selected public secondary schools in Kurudu and Jikwoyi axis of Abuja. The instrument used for data collection was a researcher-designed questionnaire with 20 items adapted from Jie, Yuhong and Yuan (2014). The research questions were analysed using frequency count, percentages, mean and standard deviation. Findings indicated that respondents perceive the dislike for reading, high cost of books, teaching methods and difficult/unfamiliar words as factors responsible for the decline in literature enrolment. Findings also showed that all the respondents believe that literature can enhance their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Based on these findings, it was recommended that Literature should be made compulsory for all students. Training and retraining, workshop and seminars should be arranged for teachers to expose them to creative methods for teaching English and literature. Teachers should use effective, creative learner centred methods to get students interested and motivated to study literature and Government should provide needed texts in quantities large enough for students' use. These can be placed in the school libraries.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Enhancing, reading comprehension, critical thinking skills, perception.

Introduction

Language learning and proficiency requires that one acquires the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and language sub-skills of vocabulary, reading comprehension, summary writing and literature components. Literature has been seen as providing material for acquiring the language skills and the culture of that language, facilitating comprehension and the ability to think critically. Reading and comprehending what is read, is considered one of the most important skills needed in the English as second language (ESL) context. To help students develop critical reading ability is a major goal in reading instruction. This, literature can provide for learners. In addition, Keshavarzi (2012) opines that the use or study of literature encourages more thoughtful and purposeful language learning because learners are not only exposed to the real use of language, they also become critical thinkers.

The study of literature especially in an ESL has many benefits. First, literature is a good source of accurate diction, diverse sentence patterns and passionate narratives (Ghosn, 2002). Based on this, Keshavarzi (2012) submits

that the significance of literature in promoting learners' language proficiency is beyond doubt as literature brings knowledge to them and gives them problem solving experiences. It makes students learn about their creativity and imagination, interacting with the text themselves and playing different roles.

Let us take a look at the objectives of teaching literature as spelt out by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC, 2008). These are to: - broaden the cultural horizon of students through literary texts that vary in perspectives but are universal in application; expose students to healthy human values and attributes; expose students to the beauty and potentials of language and more. These objectives are hinged on the acclaimed benefits of studying literature. In spite of all known benefits of studying literature, students' enrolment is on the decline. The reasons for the decline are many. Amongst them is the misguided notion that only science subjects can produce analytical and sound minds. There is therefore, the need to reinvent students' interest in literature to enable them tap from its many benefits one of

which is the promotion of reflective critical thinking in learners. Through literature, students may feel a greater sense of shared responsibility towards events globally. For example, when students read about a bombing of trains in Nigeria or war in a neighboring country, they may be concerned about the loss of lives. Literature can also enable them think deeply about not just the stories they read, but ask essential questions about what it means to be human being, be tolerant with and how to relate with others (Loh, 2014).

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive ability requiring the capacity to integrate text information with the prior knowledge of the reader resulting in the elaboration of mental representation. Reading comprehension is a skill every student need for academic and career pursuits. Effiom, Timothy & Okon (2018) opine that one who reads without understanding is on a futile journey leading to a dead end. However, many students according researchers such as Adeniji and Omale (2010) are of the opinion that students' difficulties in reading comprehension are due to the ineffective pedagogical approaches applied by teachers. Apart from ineffective teaching approaches, the study of literature is not seen to be beneficial to language learners.

Literature in the ESL class is important. A study by Granath (2017) submits that teachers viewed the role of literature as a way of enhancing students' social and cultural awareness and language proficiency. He, however stated further that the biggest constraint perceived by the teachers to effective teaching and learning of literature were unmotivated and uninterested students. Numerous works on the use of literary texts in the ESL classroom highlight its importance as a means of enhancing critical thinking and creativity among language learners (Ghosn, 2002). Alamroni (2019) submits that despite literature being seen as providing rich linguistic input for language learners, the expected level of a better English language performance is still difficult to attain due to the old methods employed in teaching as well as teachers' fundamental lack of experience and knowledge. To him, most teachers use whatever method they have at their disposal not minding that literature should be related as much as possible to real life experiences. Lawal (2019) decried the way literature is being taught in the secondary schools by saying that learners are reduced to robots who are forced to swallow and later regurgitate ill-digested literary terms and techniques. In addition, in most cases many schools do not have enough qualified teachers resulting in haphazard teaching, uninterested and

unmotivated learners who detest reading too many and different set of books by the different examination bodies (Ogunnaike, 2002: Fatimayin & Lawal, 2010). As a remedy, Onukaogu (2002) proposes the study of literature to make learners more reflective, critical, strategic and purposeful readers.

Literature is of immense benefit to language development. Ghosn (2002), argues that literature is a good source of accurate diction, diverse sentence patterns and passionate narratives while Langer (1997, p.607) opines that literature helps students to question and explore the world around them and opens "horizons of possibility". In a related manner, Stefanova, Bobkina & Perez (2017), submit that literature can develop the skills students need to understand hidden meanings, reconstruct images from details, separate facts from opinions and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of their daily life. Lawal (2019) submits that Literature has the following characteristics and have the potentials for not only imitating our world in all its imperfections, but also recreating it by artistically exposing the drawbacks and attempting to perfect the imperfections. In a related manner, Ryan & Ryan (n.d.) submit that literature reflects the society, human condition, ideology and also changes ideology while making learners think. It can be used to develop learner's capacity for discrimination, judgment and decision making.

Keshavarzi (2012) also believe that literature is significant in promoting English learners' knowledge and second - hand problem solving experiences. Going on, he argues that literature helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and provides learners with opportunities to effectively use words in different contexts as it allows them verbalise their thoughts and develop higher levels of thinking skills. To him, literary texts are good means of creating avenues for learners to go through reflective thinking to see why things are the way they see them or why things are different from their expectations enabling them to perceive and better understand the situation.

Critical thinking is a complex process and entails higher order thinking. A critical thinker is one that is able to solve problems, make decisions, evaluate information and formulate inferences. It the ability to use one's mind to achieve desired goals. Critical thinking implies that the reader is actively and constructively engaged in the process of reading (Temple, 2005). It is one of the skills learners need to acquire to achieve learner autonomy because through reading, we are often governed by one prejudice or other. But through a clear and rational use of language, one can be freed (Ikonta,2019). There are numerous works on

the use of literary texts in ESL/EFL classroom which highlight its importance as a means of enhancing critical thinking and creativity among language learners (Ghosn,2002: Bobkina and Stefanova, 2016).

For Facione (2007), a close reading of literary texts involves critical thinking processes of analysis, synthesis, argumentation, interpretation, evaluation, problem solving and reasoning among others. Critical thinking, Cottrell (2011) submits, involves identifying other people's positions, arguments and conclusions: evaluating the evidence for alternative point of view, weighing up opposing argument and evidence fairly, being able to read between the lines, seeing behind surfaces and identifying false or unfair assumptions, recognizing techniques used to make certain position more appealing than others: reflecting on issues in a structured way, bringing logic and insight to bear and drawing conclusion. Therefore, incorporating critical thinking in reading is important as it assists students to achieve the goal of reading which is comprehension (Carr,1988).

Supporting the acquisition of critical thinking skill, Flynn (1989, p.664) state that to develop students' critical thinking ability is a major goal in reading instruction and teachers need to "present students with opportunities to analyse, synthesize and evaluate ideas through cooperative problem solving". Furthermore, Brown (2004, 25) submit that the objectives in an ideal academic English programme should not be limited to linguistic factors alone but also include developing the art of critical thinking. Therefore, the integration of critical thinking and reading could be most effective for learners. Vaseghi, Gholami & Barjesteh (2012) are emphatic that without critical thinking skills, people can be vulnerable. For them, the main benefit of critical thinking is that it encourages active learning by teaching students how to think rather than what to think. The main purpose of this study is to determine students' perception of the effectiveness of Literature-in-English in enhancing reading comprehension and critical reading skills. Specifically, the study intends to:

- i. Ascertain the factors responsible for the decline in students' enrolment in Literature.
- ii. Determine if Literature-in-English can enhance students' reading comprehension ability.
- iii. Find out if Literature-in-English can develop students' critical thinking skills.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the many acclaimed benefits of literature-in-English, students' enrolment is on the decline as many students are losing interest in the subject. Such benefits include providing learners opportunities to extend their language proficiency, communicative competence as well as engage them in collaborative construction of meaning (Ikonta, 2019). Studies have also indicated that secondary school students are deficient readers because they lack critical thinking and comprehension skills which hinder them from being strategic and purposeful in reading. The causes of these shortcomings have been attributed to a number of factors some of which are the method of teaching English language and literature and other pedagogical factors which have made Literature uninteresting to students. Lawal (2019) state that at the secondary school level literature class, learners have been reduced to robots as a result of the methods used by teachers which made learners unable to comprehend materials, unable to be critical thinkers who can make informed unbiased judgment. This study is therefore, an attempt to find out the perception of students about the effectiveness of literature for enhancing reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all senior secondary school students in Jikwoyi axis of AMAC, Abuja. Purposive sampling was used to get students offering literature-in-English, for example the Arts classes. Random sampling was then used to select four schools from the 12 schools in that axis. From senior secondary class 2, random sampling was utilized to pick 25 students from each of the four schools to make a total of 100. The main instrument is a researcher – designed questionnaire with 20 items. The questionnaire items used were adapted from Jie, Yuhong and Yuan (2014). It had two sections. Section A contained demographic information while section B contained 20 items divided into two sections with response options based on a 4-point Likert scale of Always (4), Sometimes (3), Seldom (2), Never (1). The instrument had a reliability index of 0.72 established using the Cronbach Alpha formula. The instrument was validated by experts in test and measurement of the Faculty of Education, National Open University of Nigeria. Data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, percentages and mean and standard deviation. A cut off point of 3.00 was adopted for decision making and any item with a mean of above 3.0 was accepted while those with

below 3.0 were rejected. The study was guided by these research questions:

1. What are the factors responsible for the decline in students' enrolment in Literature?
2. Can Literature in English enhance students' reading comprehension?
3. Can Literature in English help in developing students' critical thinking skills?

The schools where the samples were selected are:

Government Model Secondary School, Jikwoyi, Abuja.

Government Secondary School, Kurudu, Abuja.

Government Secondary School, Orozo, Abuja

Governments Secondary School, Karshi, Abuja.

Findings

Analysis of demographic information

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by demographic information

Variables	Parameters	Frequency	Percentage
Class	SS2	100	100
Gender			
Female	58	58	58
Male	52	52	52
Age group	14-15	35	35
	16 above	65	65

Results on table 1 showed that all respondents are in senior secondary class 2. 58 (58%) of these are females while 52 (52%) are males. 35 (35%) of the respondents fall within the age range of 14-15 years and 65 (65%) are aged 16 and above.

Research Question One: What are the factors responsible for the decline in students' enrolment in Literature?

Table 2: Factors responsible for the decline in students' enrolment in Literature

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Teachers' methods of teaching	68	68
2.	Too many books to read	74	74
3.	Books are expensive	55	55
4.	I don't like reading	62	62
5.	I don't understand some words used	48	48

Table 2 results indicate that students (75, 75%) perceive too many set books as the biggest factor responsible for enrolment decline in literature. 68 (68%) think that teacher's method is responsible; 62 (62%) are of the opinion that the dislike for reading is a factor responsible for decline in student's literature enrolment, and 55 (55%) think that the high cost of books is responsible while 48 (48%) believe that not understanding some words in the text is a factor for the decline in enrolment.

Research question 2: Can Literature in English enhance students' reading comprehension?

Table 3: Mean, and Standard Deviation on literature and reading comprehension

S/N	Item Statement	N	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	After reading a text, I know the author's purpose	100	3.63	.51	Accepted
2	I can locate the main ideas of the text after reading	100	3.58	.52	Accepted
3	I can write out the main ideas in my own words because I understand the passage	100	3.58	.52	Accepted
4	After reading, I am able to figure out implied meaning, mood, tone or attitude	100	3.60	.49	Accepted
5	I can distinguish facts from opinion	100	3.62	.49	Accepted
6	I can make inferences and read beyond the lines	100	3.63	.51	Accepted
7	I can find reasonable arguments in the text to support my own views	100	3.64	.50	Accepted
8	I can make connections between the text and my experiences and beliefs	100	3.62	.51	Accepted
9	Most times, I cannot understand the passage because of the words used	100	3.61	.53	Accepted
10	I can accurately define the problem depicted in the text and understand the message	100	3.56	.54	Accepted
11	Reading literature texts help me sharpen my language skills	100	3.56	.49	Accepted
12	I like to study literature much because of the teacher's method of teaching it	100	1.78	.66	Rejected
13	I do not like Literature because there are too many books to read				

100 3.19 49 Accepted

Aggregate

100 2.60 .52

Results on table 3 show that to a very large extent, students are of the opinion that literature can enhance their reading comprehension. However, they mostly would not want to study literature because of teachers' method of teaching it, coupled with the fact of too many books to be read.

Research Question 3: Can Literature in English help in developing students' critical thinking skills?

Table 4: Mean, and Standard Deviation on literature for developing critical thinking skills

S/N	Item Statement	N	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	After reading, I can make inform judgement about authenticity of information provided	100	3.55	.52	Accepted
2	I can correct unreasonable inferences made in the passage	100	3.55	.52	Accepted
3	I can relate and connect issues depicted in the text to the prevailing situation for better understanding	100	3.57	.54	Accepted
4	I can demonstrate a deep understanding of culture, personal, biases, experiences and beliefs.	100	3.52	.64	Accepted
5	Based on what I read, I can reason and proffer solutions to problems	100	3.41	.69	Accepted
6	I can better understand humanity, the need for peace and tolerance	100	3.36	.69	Accepted
7	Reading about other peoples' experiences of war, destruction, terrorism, I will advocate peace and togetherness.	100	3.37	.61	Accepted
	Aggregate	100	3.48	.60	

Results on table 4 indicate that the students are convinced that literature can help in developing their critical skills. For example, they can read a text, make inform judgment, correct unreasonable inferences, proffer solutions, understand values and humanity better, etc.

Discussion

This study revealed that students perceive the dislike for reading, high cost of books, too many books to be read, teacher's teaching methods, difficult or unfamiliar words used in the texts as factors responsible for the decline in

literature enrolment. This finding is in agreement with Ogunnaike (2002) and Fatimayin & Lawal (2010) that literature in most cases is not properly taught and the way teachers' handle the literature class will urge students to cultivate the right attitude towards the subject.

Findings of the study also show that most of the students believe that literature can go a long way in enhancing their reading comprehension. This is in line with Stefanova, Bobkina & Perez (2017) that literature can develop the skills students need to understand hidden meanings,

reconstruct images from details, separate facts from opinions and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of their daily life.

Again, findings of this study indicate that literature can help develop students' critical thinking skills. This corroborates This corroborates Keshavarzi (2012) that literature is significant in promoting English learners' knowledge and second-hand problem solving experiences and that literature helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and provides learners with opportunities to effectively use words in different contexts as it allows them verbalise their thoughts and develop higher levels of thinking skills. To him, literary texts are good means of creating avenues for learners to go through reflective thinking to see why things are the way they see them or why things are different from their expectations enabling them to perceive and better understand the situation. It also agrees with Ryan & Ryan (n.d.) that literature can be used to develop learner's capacity for discrimination, judgment and decision making.

Conclusion

The benefits of literature for developing students reading comprehension and critical thinking skills are evident. This paper explored students' perception of the effectiveness of literature for enhancing and developing their reading comprehension and critical thinking. Reading and understanding a text and being able to interpret, make seasoned judgment and understand different viewpoints is a plus for learners in our world that needs people who can think, analyse situations and stand for the right thing. Based of this, it is recommended that: -

- Literature should be made compulsory for all students.
- Training and retraining, workshop and seminars should be arranged for teachers to expose them to creative for teaching English and literature.
- Teachers should use effective, creative learner centred methods to get students interested and motivated to study literature and

Government should provide needed texts in quantities large enough for students' use. These can be placed in the school libraries.

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