



Revamping the Reading Culture and Critical Literacy of Nigerians through Literature

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Abstract

Readers have been said to be leaders but this saying is fast becoming a farce in the current Nigerian society as a lot of distractions have taken the place of reading in the attitude of the young and old Nigerians. The place of reading in the realisation of critical literacy – which is the central thinking skill that involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires individuals to synthesise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts they read or listen to – can never be underestimated. Reading has played a lot of crucial roles in the revolution of many societies – Nigeria inclusive. Since this important culture is fast dying in Nigeria and amongst Nigerians, this paper seeks to advocate the reintroduction and compulsion of literature at all levels of the Nigerian educational system to ensure that critical literacy is achieved. Bringing back literature in all its forms at all levels of education – irrespective of discipline – will ensure that Nigerians regain the reading culture and thence the critical literacy skills required to ensure the development and growth of the Nigerian country.

Keywords: *Reading, Critical Literacy, Nigeria, Growth, Development, Education.*

Introduction

Reading has been described as the process of taking in the sense or meaning of letters, symbols, especially by sight or touch (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022). It is also the act of looking at printed matter and understanding the words therein (Collins Dictionary, 2022). Reading is also the vocalisation of printed or written words (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The Oxford Learners' Dictionary (2022) notes that when we read, we produce mentally or vocally the written or printed words by following the symbols with the eyes or fingers. However, various scholarly definitions of the word exist. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985, p.7) define reading as “the process of constructing meaning from

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written texts” noting that, “it is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information” (p. 7).

Also, Leu and Kinzer (1987) submit that reading is a development, interactive, and global process involving learned skills, which incorporates and can be influenced by non-linguistic internal and external factors. Tarigan (2008) opines that reading is a process carried out and used by a reader to obtain message which is intended by a writer through words that could be seen and known by reader. Musfiroh (2014) also defines reading as an activity to get meaning from printed words or symbols and how this ability is used to recognise, understand and interpret words. Reading is a multi-faceted activity as noted by educators and researchers due to the fact that it involves such areas as word recognition, spelling, alphabet-identification, phonic and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and motivation (Leipzig, 2001). Joyce and Borgwaldt (2013) note that some forms of reading and writing like pictograms are not speech-based.

Similarly, literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write. Montoya (2018, p. 2) defines literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts”. Peterson (2020) notes that literacy is more than reading and writing; a view also shared by the United Nations’ Scientific and Cultural Organisation. UNESCO (2018) says that literacy is “a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world”. Rintaningrum (2009) notes that because of the constant changes in its definition, literacy is a real-world activity in which students apply their classroom reading and writing skills to real-life situations.

The importance of literacy has come to be seen in national development because being functionally literate is fundamental to success in school and in life. Hence, critical literacy has come to be an important aspect of global discussions in recent times. The University of Melbourne (2022) notes that critical literacy is the questioning and examination of ideas, which requires an individual to synthesise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts read or listened to. The university adds that critical literacy starts with reading or listening and Smith (2015) adds that when people examine a writer's message for criticism, they are practicing critical literacy. Vasquez, Janks, and Comber (2019) suggest that critical literacy helps to view the world as a socially-constructed text that can be read and it involves making sense of the socio-political systems through which we live our lives while questioning these systems, hence, it is transformative.

Knowing that critical literacy is crucial to the development of the society as a whole and that reading culture is an essential aspect of achieving this important human behaviour, it is essential to examine what reading culture entails. Hawthorne (2021) defines reading culture as an environment where reading is championed, valued, respected, and encouraged. Nyam (2015) defines reading culture as the use of reading as a regular activity, and thus the nurturing of a mind-set and the building of skills that make reading a pleasurable, regular and

constant activity. Ailakhu and Unegbu (2017) establish that reading culture is the inculcation of reading habits in every aspect of human life and not just for school purpose only.

Since it is established that reading culture is a positive habit which is necessary in human societies, it should be noted that it contributes to critical literacy which also contributes to national development. In the current global market, being critically literate is a highly-demanded attribute in order for people to participate actively in the larger society and on the international scene for such activities such as conference, research exchanges, joint research, businesses and commerce. Rintaningrum (2009) identifies that being critically literate contribute to personal development and leads to success in school and in life.

One of the ways to ensure reading at any educational level is through the inculcation of literature into the teaching and learning of the English language. In Nigeria, English language is currently the language of instruction at all levels of education and it is also a subject taught at all these levels – as a school subject at the nursery, primary and secondary levels and as a major course of study by all students at the tertiary level of education. However, the advent of the social media and many other factors has caused a downward trend in the reading culture of Nigerians across all age gaps. But for the country to develop, reading culture needs to be improved for the entrenchment of critical literacy in Nigerians. Hence, it is the aim of this paper to advocate for a revamping of the current reading culture of Nigerians through the inculcation of literature in the teaching of English language at all levels of the country's education.

Reading Culture and Factors affecting it in Nigeria

According to the NOP World Culture Score Index (2005), Nigerians are amongst the countries in the world where the reading culture is low or non-existence. In a ranking of 30 countries on the number of hours spent reading in a week, Nigeria was not listed. Indians topped the ranking with an average of 10.7 hours spent on reading each week. Also, the News Agency of Nigeria (2018) reports that statistics from the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education shows that more than 38 per cent of Nigerians are illiterate. This is another pointer to the fact that reading culture in Nigeria is low, which will also adversely affect the development of the country. Akinfenwa (2019) claims that there is currently generally a poor reading culture in the country despite the previous literacy history the country is famous for in the era preceding and immediately after independence. He notes that during that period, Nigeria boasted of and paraded the best sets of authors and publishers in Africa which made reading interesting and attractive to the country's people. This easily transcribed into the quality of leadership and civil discipline that Nigerians exhibited and which also brought pride to the country amongst the comity of countries.

There are a lot of reasons or factors that have been ascribed to the above described current state of reading culture in Nigeria as is being witnessed. Akinfenwa (2019) suggests that reading culture is low in Nigeria due to widespread poverty, corruption, ineptitude and the absence of dedicated quiet reading spaces like libraries. He adds that a decline in the standard of education is also to blame for the current state of reading culture in Nigeria, while the fact

that adults deal with the many daily distractions and challenges of living in Nigeria also contributes to their loss of interest in reading. The country's socio-economic environment is not making reading friendly for Nigerians because the daily struggle for economic survival allows little or no time for Nigerians to develop a healthy reading culture, additionally, high costs of books, both locally and internationally, have contributed to the reduced interest in reading by Nigerians.

Also, Agbakwuru (2017) reports that this poor reading culture could be attributed to a lack of budgets for libraries. He identifies a reduction in the availability of suitable reading materials, a lack of well-designed reading activities in schools and homes, absence of trained staff to cultivate reading culture in schools and absence or futile monitoring and evaluation readership promotion programmes as some other challenges affecting readership promotion (Agbakwuru, 2017). However, Otache (2020) identifies reading language problem, low patronage of libraries, non-prioritising of reading, decision to indulge in examination malpractices, overemphasis on certificates, government attitude to education, poor quality of teachers and ill-equipped libraries as problems that cause the current reading culture in Nigeria. Bello (2006) adds that inadequate attention to the need for picture books, story books and other books in local language and high cost of printing materials which result in poor quality of children's books while Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola, and Babatunde (2015) offer that lack of parental encouragement, parental attitude and advent of modern technologies are also to blame for the low reading culture in Nigeria.

Efforts towards Reactivating Reading Culture in Nigeria

It has not all been gloom for reading in Nigeria. According to Akinfenwa (2019), some efforts geared towards the resuscitation of reading culture in the country have been done in the recent past. He notes that the Lagos State Government through the celebration of the World Literacy Day – an annual event – had established some micro-libraries in some of the parks in the state such as the JJT Park and the Ndubuisi Kanu Park – both in Ikeja area of the state. This, the writer explains, ensures that users of the Parks are able to read while having fun or unwinding away from work. The state also organises the annual Spelling Bee competition amongst the schools in its Local Government Areas. Also, one of the commercial banks in Nigeria, as a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility in 2017, organised the 'You Read Initiative' (Akinfenwa, 2019). To also encourage writers, the Nigerian Prize for Literature was introduced by the Nigerian LNG with a cash prize of \$100,000. Also, television station, Channels TV, has a running programme called *Channels Book Club*. The programme is aimed at building reading culture in young schoolchildren and adults.

Outside these explained above efforts, several privately-owned bodies, non-governmental organisations and individuals have made efforts towards the rejuvenation of reading culture in Nigeria. These individuals, private organisations and NGOs, especially during the marking of the World Literacy Day, donate books to libraries and organise workshops for teachers. These bodies and people also organise frequent reading competitions for pupils and students to encourage reading activities in schools.

Importance of a Healthy Reading Culture on National Development

According to Alex-Nmecha and Horsfall (2019), the importance of a good healthy culture to a country's citizens is listed below:

To individuals

- i. Increase in memory
- ii. Discipline
- iii. Vocabulary
- iv. Creativity and skills
- v. Knowledge
- vi. It enhances educational growth and development of the nation
- vii. Mental stimulation
- viii. Stress Relief
- ix. More good sleep
- x. Education
- xi. Better memory
- xii. Increase empathy
- xiii. Improves concentration
- xiv. Entertainment
- xv. Vocabulary expansion

To a country, a healthy reading culture, according to Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola, and Babatunde (2015), is beneficial in the following ways:

- a. It promotes national unity
- b. It grooms citizens' loyalty and national consciousness
- c. Increases national literacy levels
- d. Builds growth and development in the country
- e. Allows citizens to be aware of their rights and participate actively in governance
- f. Signifies qualitative and quantitative educational level of the country
- g. Makes citizens familiar with their history and enables them to plan for the future
- h. Aids proper use of languages in the country
- i. Builds mentally alert and emotionally recipient citizens
- j. It ensures that citizens are able to contribute positively to cultural development
- k. Speedy economic development through the building of qualified manpower for the country
- l. Boosting citizens' self esteem will allow them to grow into worthy citizens with character and learning
- m. Eradicates illiteracy which undermines governments' development efforts
- n. Teaches citizens their duties and obligations to their country.

Importance of Literature in Building Reading Culture

Rexroth (2022) defines literature simply as a body of written works. He explains that the word, historically and traditionally, has been applied to the imaginative works of poetry and prose, which are distinguished by the intentions of their writers and the perceived artistic quality of in them. Lombardi (2020) describes literature as a term used to explain written and

sometimes oral materials, which was derived from a Latin word meaning “writing formed with letters” and it also commonly refers to works of creative imagination such as poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction, journalism, and songs. The classification of literature, according to Rexroth (2022), can be done based on a variety of systems such as language, origin, historical period, genre, and subject matter. Hence, literature has three genres – prose, poetry and drama (Lombardi, 2020).

To inculcate reading habits in humans, literature is a viable tool. This is because as much as it helps in language teaching and learning, it helps to teach reading ability to learners. According to Langer (1995, p. 5), “literature plays a critical role in our life, often without our notice. It helps us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be”. He explains further that it is intellectually stimulating while allowing the use of various angles of idea to look at thoughts, values, and actions. Also, if literature is absent in a language learning class, learners will not have a chance to practice language through an individual and significant engagement that are often mainly found on the pages of literature texts, which provide low-level literal questions (Langer, 1997). Learners “are often given short passages and fill in exercises meant to develop their English (reading and other) skills before being provided with context that permits them to use those skills in interesting and meaningful ways” (Langer, 1997, p. 613). Failure to use literature in classes of language learning and reading can lead learners to have a negative view of reading and lose confidence in reading proper materials, and may lead to lack of enthusiasm towards reading in English for pleasure (Cho & Krashen, 2001).

How Literature Can Revamp Reading Culture in Nigeria

Since we have discussed the importance of literature to the building of a healthy reading culture in Nigeria, it is pertinent to state at this point that literature should be inculcated in the teaching of English language at all levels to revamp reading culture in the country due to the following discussed reasons.

Literature should be introduced at all levels of education – irrespective of field studied by learners – to instill the right reading skills in Nigerian youths. Apart from playing a positive role in the learning of English language through reading at all levels of education (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Hess, 2006), literature is also important to the building of reading culture in learners, because it is more than just a historical or cultural artifact that can serve as an introduction to a new world of experience (Lombardi, 2020). It takes us across generations and exposes us to lessons of history. Literary text readers are able to learn and display an increase in new vocabulary through the reading of literary texts (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Also, reading literature aids the building of comprehension skills in learners (Holden, 2003). In addition, literature provides learners at all levels of schooling with a combination of enjoyable and understandable texts (Krashen, 2004), which helps learners to develop a constructive attitude towards reading and the learning of other subjects that are taught in English. This change in attitude leads to more independent reading and critical literacy which impacts on the learners’ language skills (Kim, 2004). According to Dornyei (2005, p. 112), teaching English language at all levels of education with literature can help to create “an

overall positive motivational climate in the classroom”, which creates the right environment that enhances the proper motivation to engage in reading at all times.

Furthermore, Ogunnaike (2002) posits that adding literature to the teaching and learning of English at all level of Nigeria’s educational system aids cultural assimilation or acculturation. He also claims that language development and competence is built in the citizens while it also teaches conflict resolution. Ogunnaike (2002) adds that the use of literature at all levels of education teaches emotional development and stability as well as the development of helpful and good-natured attitudes towards life. These are all important national behaviours which could come out of a positive and healthy reading culture, which will be entrenched through the addition of literature to English language learning at all educational levels in Nigeria. Ihejirika (2014) establishes that literature use in the teaching of English at all levels creates a fine and broadminded education along with viable entertainment, relaxation and the sharing of vivid experiences of positive value. It also entrenches the development of preferred and pleasing moral or other behaviours – which in totality birth a stable and mature personality in the citizens (Ihejirika, 2014).

Notably, Widdowson (1977) defers that it is important to note that literary texts are better than non-literary ones because they depend greatly on the reader’s interpretation. Literature is different from all other teaching forms and its language is structured into models of frequent sounds, structures and meanings on figurative and thematic levels. Collie and Slater (1990) state that literature used at all levels of language learning ensures an invaluable realisation of reliable material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement in the activities. Additionally, Heath (1996) indicates that literature creates in the learners a natural repetition, a reflection on language and how it works, and attention to audience response, thereby integrating literature into the teaching and learning of English across all levels of education in Nigeria can provide intelligible input and a low affective filter (Rodrigo et al., 2004).

Also, literature at all levels of education presents an opportunity for learners to choose from a rich source of vocabulary as they would be learning language and literacy through an appropriate literary text for their levels. Strong (1996) argues that learning English language with literature at all levels offers a source for a proper way to learn reading. It helps to form apart of communicative pedagogy as it provides a context which helps to develop students’ critical reading strategies and knowledge of non-fiction and literary texts; it forms the foundation for an extensive reading programme which helps to acquire new vocabulary and grammatical forms; and it offers the occasion to discover cross-cultural ideals (Strong, 1996). Beck and McKeown (2001) posit that reading literature is beneficial because most of the vocabulary used by individuals were either read in books or heard.

Conclusion

Reading is done by people for many reasons – including education. Some of these reasons for reading could be for self-improvement, pleasure, mental relief, entertainment and relaxation. Reading is an aspect of critical literacy which is important for the development of

any nation or country's development and growth. It has many benefits for the individual and the country at large. It has been said that readers are leaders and the insurance given by reading to readers can never be quantified.

The reading culture in any country is the reason they are what they are – developed or underdeveloped. Nigeria's reading culture is one of the lowest in the world as of today. This important human attribute has been neglected by Nigerians due to a lot of reasons. Some scholars attributed this neglect to technological advancement, poverty, corruption, laziness on the part of students, and many other reasons. To stem its tide, many efforts have been put forward by stakeholders, such as the government, private organisations, NGOs and even individuals. However, an important aspect has been neglected – which is the use of literature in the teaching and learning of the English language at all levels of education.

This paper has examined the importance of literature and the ways it could be used for the revamping of reading and critical literacy in the Nigerian society. Thus, it could be concluded that this important culture should be encouraged and entrenched in the country's citizens through the implementation of the use of literature texts for learning English language across all levels of education in Nigeria.

Recommendation

After the examination and explanation of how literature can be used to revamp reading culture and critical literacy of Nigerians, the following are recommended:

- a. A review of the National Policy on Education to include the use of literature at all levels of education;
- b. The selection of proper and correct literature texts to be used for the different levels of education in the country
- c. Sensitisation of all stakeholders to the benefits of having a healthy reading culture in the country and the need to have literature used in language learning at all levels of education
- d. Improved funding for the establishment and equipment of libraries, where learners and other citizens can access literature texts with ease
- e. Government legislation that will ensure that private organisations are able to direct their CSRs towards the purchase of literary texts for students for easy learning and enhancement of the reading culture
- f. Provision of literature texts for learners by their parents
- g. Resuscitation of mobile library facilities especially in rural areas for easy access to literature texts.

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