

OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LITERARY TEXTS IN THE CLASSROOM SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Literary activities are carried out within the context of language and writers are known to have been bend language to their creative will. Literature has long been acknowledged as an integral part of language teaching and learning playing a key role in the classroom setting. In the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language, however, literature and the use of literary texts in the classroom suffered a set-back due to inconsistencies in the French teaching methods. The difficulties experienced by teachers and students in the teaching and learning of French through literature are primarily due to lack of methodological approaches on the part of the teachers, the linguistic incompetence on the part of the students and the use of literary texts that are out of context. Literature teachers should organize their works methodologically, take a step back and re-evaluate the texts selected in relationship to the linguistic and academic level of students. As Onyemelukwe points out, "Teaching literature does not mean an ostentatious display of one's knowledge in complex French but choosing the right lexis and expression in French commensurate with the linguistic competence of the learners to ensure that the right goods are delivered, that the behavioural objectives set for each literature lesson is achieved by the end of the lesson". This paper, therefore, seeks to reaffirm the relevance of literature and the use of literary texts in the classroom setting in the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

A discourse in language often overflows into a discourse in literature and vice versa. The reason is not farfetched because language accomplishment is rooted in literary activities. Literary activities mobilize all the resources of the language, celebrate language in all its beauty, and often oblige it to recreate itself through neologisms and other forms of expression. Akakuru (2009:3) points out that "literature is a unique use of language, at once as a means of communication and an end in itself". The interface or symbiotic relationship between literature and language is rightly underscored in the views of some critics who opine that language only lives and prospers because writers, artisans of the word, bend it to their creative will.

However, literature and the use of literary texts in a classroom setting in the teaching/learning of French as a foreign language have been bedevilled for some time now due to the inconstancy of the French language teaching methods. Over time series of teaching methods have been experimented in the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language – traditional method, natural method, direct method, eclectic method, audio-oral method, audio-visual method and presently communicative method – and literature has been disappearing and resurfacing as an integral part of the language teaching depending on the method in place at a given time. Balogun (2006:3) asserts that "due to its position and the functions that have been attributed to it, literature was used to crown the teaching/learning of French language until late fifties". This is to say that literature was acknowledged as an integral part of language teaching/learning and played a key role in the classroom setting throughout the periods where traditional, natural, direct, eclectic and audio-oral methods were in practice. Cuq and Gruca (2003:376) captured what happened later when they affirmed: "In the beginning of 1960, the audio-visual method banished literature from the teaching of French and evacuated literary text from teaching aids used in the classroom situation". But audio-visual method was not an end in itself as it was replaced by the communicative method which reintroduced literature and the use of literary texts in the classroom setting.

The inconstancy in the teaching methods gave birth to vagrancy in the application of literature and literary texts in the classroom setting. Thus, this paper seeks among other things to reaffirm the relevance of literature and the use of literary texts in the classroom setting, to review some difficulties encountered by students in the learning of French language through literature and to propose a possible approach in teaching literature, both French and African, in a French as a foreign language classroom setting.

LITERATURE AND THE TEACHING OF FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

This paper is of the opinion that literature being the knowledge of a patrimony linked to a culture, to a language and to aesthetic values, its teaching, therefore, should emphasize the learners' attention to set of themes which are inherent to the cultural values of the social group in question and have bearing on the message of the writer and his writing techniques. The paper is underlining here that the teaching of literature seeks to bring the learner in contact with the relationship between form and meaning. Literature viewed from the above perspective shows that its teaching is an onerous task. It becomes more complicated and complex within the framework of French as a foreign language class and specifically in Nigeria.

French is taught in Nigeria as a third language (L3) and the Abacha administration made it the second official language of the country. French is also supposed to be made compulsory in the primary and secondary school levels (FRN, NPE, 1998: 9). There is a need to point out that literature is communicated through language and that language, culture, and literature are closely related. The root of the difficulties in the teaching/learning of literature in a language class emanates from the inter-relatedness of these three notions, language, culture, literature, which are neither identical nor super-imposable. This is why Onyemelukwe (2006:30) argues that "the ability to decipher a text, grasp the content or form, the author's message, depends a great deal on the ability to understand the language of the writer which is the target language. And Olayiwola (2003:101) concurs by saying that "these difficulties can only disappear with a good knowledge of the target language (French) on one side and the knowledge of the literary, political, cultural, social, economical and historical basic ideas of the literary work". It becomes, therefore, imperative to underscore this chain of ideas to enable the readers find the possibility of grasping the gravity of the difficulties to which the teaching of literature in French as a foreign language is confronted. The difficulties go beyond the attempts to instill in the learner the curiosity or the pleasure to read. Motivation is of course a problem, but the major problem is to awaken the desire of the learners to go beyond the surface of the text and get to the depth of the matter, (what Akakuru refers to as "the contextual meaning"). Garcia (1995:4) calls this approach an optimistic conception. However, as literature is not taught in isolation or in a vacuum, the question of the choice of literary text to use emerges, which constitutes a problem on its own. In the light of this, Papo and Bourgain (1989) argues that, "to choose a literary text, it is necessary to consider the public who is the person addressed (that is the receiver, the audience, the interlocutor, the person to whom the linguistic message is addressed, in this case the learners). This is so because, to manoeuvre efficiently within the framework of a classroom communication just like in any other communication, the interlocutor, not the speaker (the author of the linguistic message), has to be in the forefront. He, the learner, becomes paramount in the sense that, for learning to take place in a fruitful way, it is him alone who learns and manifests a behavioural change. No one else can take the place of the learner. A good teacher of French as a foreign language should know how to make his students work and manage his lectures in such a way as to make his teaching interactive.

However, this desirous goal will not be achieved by the French teacher in a literature class unless the French teacher takes into consideration the academic level of his students and their linguistic competence. This underscores the fact that the literary text to be chosen must be commensurate with the academic level and the linguistic competence of the learners. Once a solid foundation is lacking in the learners in the language of communication (French), they will find it difficult to understated literature or any other thing being taught. It has been observed that the problem of linguistic incompetence leads to poor performance and failure in literature courses in examinations. This situation is due to the continuous recourse to literary texts that prove to be very difficult for the learners.

This present state of things implies the reduction in academic standard which, though a universal phenomenon, seems to be more pervasive here in Nigeria, especially at the levels where this present paper is anchored. In a French as a foreign language class where there are, among others, beginners and virtual beginners as it is the case with PRE NCE students and First year NCE and B.ED 4/4 students, the choice of the literary texts to use in teaching constitutes an enormous problem. It has been observed that some literature teachers resort to teach these sets of students to read only small fragments of the literary texts instead of initiating them to the studying of the full text. They see the initiation to the study of the text entirely as impracticable due to the linguistic incompetence of the students. And the outcome is a situation where literature is considered as central to the learning of the language but it is put aside at the same time. Consequently students finish a three year or four year program

without finishing a single literary text. Reducing literature to a simple strategy of communication is what we mean by putting it aside. This practice must be condemned and a solution must be found.

POSSIBLE METHODOLOGICAL STEPS: THE WAY OUT

The methodological steps outlined here are among the many approaches that can be used to tackle the hydra-headed problem of teaching literature in the French as a foreign language class setting. In practice the literature teacher in the French as a foreign language class setting seems to have two modes to follow. On one hand he may choose to continue with the literary texts recommended in the basic syllabus and await massive failure of his or her students due to their linguistic incompetence that is a hindrance to grasping the texts. On the other hand he can resort to taking some steps back and reevaluate the texts to be chosen in relationship to the linguistic and academic levels of his students. There is a need to underline once more that the choice of the literary texts should be done after due consideration of the linguistic competence of the learners. Onyemelukwe (2000:87) buttresses this argument when she opines categorically that “teaching literature does not mean an ostentatious display of one’s knowledge in complex French but choosing the right lexis and expression in French commensurate with the linguistic competence of the learners to ensure that the right goods are delivered, that the behavioural objectives set for each literature lesson is achieved by the end of the lesson”.

In this regard, Onyemelukwe (2006:34) draws attention to the existence of inappropriate literary texts in the syllabus and says that “it is no longer feasible to teach the beginners and virtual beginners some literary texts such as “*L’enfant noir*” of Camara Laye, *Les soleils des independences*” of Ahmadou Kourouma, “*Ville cruelle*”, “*Le Roi Miracle*”, “*Perpetue et l’Habitue du Malheur*” of Mongo Beti, *O pays, mon beau peuple*”, “*Les Bouts de bois de dieu*” of Sembene Ousmane, “*Une si longue letter*” of Mariama Ba, “*La Greve des Battu*” of Aminata Sow Fall. The same goes for the literary texts recommended for French literature at these levels: “*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*” “*Le malade imaginaire*” of Moliere, “*Andromaque*” of Racine, “*Le cid*” of Corneille, “*Candide*” of Voltaire and “*Les faux-monnayeurs*” of Andre Gide. Experience in the French as a foreign language class shows clearly that literary works that are part of the texts recommended in the old courses and even in recently renewed and approved courses for these levels, are very difficult for these sets of learners because of their linguistic incompetence.

Onyemelukwe speaks our mind when she argues in the same paper that “for the teaching of French or francophone literature to be interactive, interesting and fruitful, the French teachers should focus more on the literary works whose level of difficulty is commensurate to both the academic and linguistic level of the learners in question”. This implies that for the pre-NCE and the first year NCE and the first year B.A. ED program, the literature teacher should choose literary texts that have simplified form. The simplified forms of literary texts are called “Textes en francais facile” and the writers whose texts have been simplified include: Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir* adapted by Jacques Fiot; Balzac, *Eugenie Grandet* adapted by Jacques Verdol; Jules Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* adapted by Jean Avier; Rabelais, *Gargantua* adapted by Jacques Fiot; Voltaire, *Candide* adapted by Jacques Fiot. When this problems of the choice of literary texts is resolved, the next should be the effective approach or method to be adopted in teaching literature in the French as a foreign language class.

We are proposing here an approach in making the teaching of literature in a French as a Foreign Language (FFL) class more interesting and more interactive. This approach is not an end in itself as it can be improved upon, bent and amended in accordance with the situation in a literature class. It is more of methodological steps than a standard approach. Here, the literature teacher may start by dividing the class into small groups. However, this division will depend largely on the length of the chosen text. For instance, in a drama of four acts, preferably the class can have four groups. The most important thing is to have a leader in each group. After grouping the class, the literature teacher can facilitate the study of the chosen text through an already-prepared questions which aim at directing students. The study of the text proper takes three steps: there is preliminary reading, then comes the global reading and finally the detailed reading.

To enable the students understand the text they are reading, the prepared questions of the teachers should include the following items: who, what, where, when. How, How many, etc.? These pertinent questions which can be modified in relation to the chosen text and the classroom situation, are geared towards analysing all the communication situations found in the text.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, efforts have been made to highlight the relevance of literature and the use of literary texts in a classroom situation. Concepts related to this study, such as literature, language, literature text and classroom setting, have been defined, and the role of literature in the teaching of French as a foreign language has been discussed and analysed.

Finally, a methodological approach has been proposed. This approach is neither a model nor a method; rather, a methodological step. The various stages of this approach are designed to restore literature and literary texts their rightful place in the classroom and to make the study of literary texts dynamic, engaging and interactive.

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