

Students' Perceptions of English Language Learning through Literature: A Case Study of ND One Students of selected Polytechnics in Edo State, Nigeria



Odoemenam, Temple Chibueze*;

Elom, Philomena*;

Nwopa, Samuel U.°

&

Omoghie, Aslem I.†

Abstract

The significance of the English language as a means of communication in Nigeria and as a veritable means of instruction at the various levels of the Nigeria Tertiary Institutions cannot be too stressed. To this end, many teachers of the use of English and communication in Polytechnics have employed varied methods in teaching the subject. One such method is the use of sets of literary texts in the teaching of English courses. While this approach seems suitable for teachers based on their background, it elicits various responses/attitudes from students. This research, therefore, examined the perceptions of students in the learning of the English language through literature at the National Institute of Construction Technology and Management (NICTM), Uromi, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Light House Polytechnic, Evbobanosa, and Edo State Polytechnic, Usen, all in Edo State. The aim was to determine to what extent students benefit from language proficiency through literature. The study used questionnaires that sought responses to selected research questions. The questionnaires were administered to a total of 600 ND one students, of the 2022/2023 set, of the selected polytechnics. The data collected were analyzed using simple percentage tables, followed by discussions of the findings and recommendations. Among many findings are: i. English language learners prefer literary works that are written in a more straightforward language (prose) to the more ambiguous, flowery, Onate diction, and imagery of poetry. ii. Respondents showed a preference for African-authored and African-set literary works over foreign-authored works set outside Africa. It was recommended that reading literature should be made compulsory at tertiary institutions especially, the polytechnics, while emphasizing improvement in the quality of pedagogical processes in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Polytechnics, Students, Perception, Language learning, literature.

* Odoemenam, Temple Chibueze, National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, Edo State, email: T.odoemenam@nict.edu.ng

† Elom, Philomena, National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, Edo State

° Nwopa, Samuel U., National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, Edo State

† Omoghie, Aslem I., National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, Edo State

Introduction

The acquisition of English language skills via interaction with literary texts is fast becoming more of a rule than an exception. The behaviourists believe that success or failure in acquiring a target language largely depends on the attitude of the learners. In essence, the learners' effective mastery of the target language is determined by their readiness to copy the speech habits of the native speakers. These make up proponents of the audio method of language acquisition, which had held sway in the period spanning the 1950s and 1960s. This patterned practice offers the learner of a second language (L2) the most effective strategy to attain a high level of proficiency (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

The socio-linguistic theorists are of the view that person-to-person communication that exists among people while they work, play, or spend time together is the most important factor that determines proficiency in a particular language. To achieve this, the sociolinguistic principle of immersion was applied. By this principle, every second language learner who desires proficiency must become part of the culture through the target language. Here, the learner of the English language through literature is immersed in the social interactions involving the characters they read in poetry, prose, and drama. To be adequately guided by the socio-linguistic principles that aid the understanding of and the acquisition of a second language, the learners must be exposed to suitable social interactions with other speakers of the target language through poems, novels, short stories, and dramatic works. This position agrees with Krashen's (1982.p.3) that "high level of second language attainment... even under optional conditions take time to achieve". It is safe to say, therefore, that interaction with others through characters, dialogues, conversations, and other communication exchanges in the second language being learned doubles the chances of success.

Again, Nnolim (2008, p.68) in wanting to know what literature has done for Nigeria and why it deserves a place in the scheme of things in our educational system, extols the achievement of Nigerian literacy giants, by way of answering the questions he raised, and concludes: "...they have done this by bending, twisting and proverbialising the English language or revealing the innate wealth of our vernacular languages" (69). These twisted or bent English language expressions according to Agbada (1998, p.160) are referred variously to as "those expressions that have developed in Nigerian language owing to the failure or inability of the English language to adequately represent certain Nigerian peculiarities, at least, as neatly as Nigerian speaker of English would have wished".

In the same vein, Williams (1999, p.5) describes the twisted language expressions thus:

"...the learner's mastery of the sound system can be enhanced in poetry and with dialogue in drama. His use of vocabulary, idioms, and systematic structure to the best model of contemporary prose fiction and non-fiction. Literature has a definite place in the second language teaching and learning".

These opinions quoted above are two, because in the course of using literary texts to teach or learn, speaking and listening skills are developed in addition to reading skills. What this means is that the learning of the English language through literature offers the learner the opportunity not only to acquire standard English or received pronunciation (RP) skills but also to make up for its deficiency in the accommodation of local peculiarities. It is against this backdrop that this research seeks to determine to what

extent students benefit from literature with regard to language proficiency; the genres of literature that best enhance their individual proficiency; the problems they encounter; and the implications of such problems for the acquisition of English language skills. The 2022/2023 ND one students of the selected polytechnics in Edo State, were used by this study as the study population.

Statement of the Research Problem/Justification

There is a widely held belief that English is such a hard language to learn. This viewpoint can hardly be disputed considering the unsatisfactory oral and written English language skills among our students at all levels of education. Even with good grades in the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), numerous candidates miss out on admission to higher education institutions due to their inability to obtain a passing grade in English in JAMB or/ SSCE. Students' shabby grasp of English becomes evident during conversations with them. This ugly situation is easily attributed to factors such as the teacher-centered approach used by teachers of English, students' lack of active engagement in the learning process, insufficient teaching materials, and limited access to practical facilities. A teacher-centered approach tends to render students passive learners, resulting in a negative attitude towards the language and ultimately resulting in poor academic performance.

To address the issue, we saw a need to redirect attention toward the learners themselves, the learning strategies they prefer, and the rationale behind their choices. Again, there is a need for the development of innovative methods and techniques such as the deployment of literature in learning to make it interesting. Such efforts can lead to improved language proficiency, higher student engagement, and a more positive attitude toward learning English. The problem of this study, therefore, was to find out how tertiary education students perceive the integration of literary materials in the learning of the English language.

Literature Review

Several studies have investigated students' perceptions of English literature in the ESL classroom with different dimensions and research designs (Carroli, 2002; Mustafa et al., 2020; Naser & Aziz, 2017; Othman, Shah, Karim, Yusof, Din, Ramli, & Salleh, 2015; Tseng, 2010;). Most of these studies demonstrated the importance of considering students' perceptions in the literature teaching process. For example, Carroli (2002) investigated the perceptions of literature among students in Italy and Australia. The study concluded that students' perceptions of literature should be fundamental in text selection and pedagogical practices. Therefore, to achieve a positive learning outcome in the literature classroom, the student's perceptions and interests must be accorded much consideration (Naser & Aziz, 2017; Othman et al., 2015; Sidhu, 2003; Tseng; 2010).

Furthermore, Othman et al. (2015) examined students' perceptions and challenges concerning English literature learning in Selangor, Malaysia. The study found that the majority of the students have positive perceptions of literary texts. Similarly, Mustafa et al. (2020) found that ESL learners have positive attitudes towards learning literature and its methods of teaching. According to these findings, students' positive perception of literature could help teachers and educationists in developing an effective curriculum and teaching strategies (Othman et al., 2015). However, students' attitudes toward literature are often neglected and curriculums are usually determined by educationists

whose expectations might not suit the students' abilities (Tseng, 2010). According to Othman *et al.* (2015), learning outcomes in the literature classroom are dependent upon the students' perceptions of the integration of literature in the ESL classroom.

BTESL Students' Perception towards Literature Subjects, is the thrust of the study carried out by Mohammad *et al.* (2021). The study found that the students have positive perceptions and attitudes in learning literature subjects. It also revealed certain challenges faced by the students in learning literature subjects, that need to be overcome by the educators. Consequently, to ensure an effective teaching and learning process on literature text, the researchers recommended that educators must be considered in selecting text to be included in the classroom as they play important roles in identifying student needs in ensuring the success of the teaching and learning process.

Additionally, studies have shown that students have different interests across various literary genres. In this regard, Naser and Aziz (2017) found that students were more interested in the plots of the texts rather than the type of literature used, while Tseng (2010) reported that students like novels most, followed by plays and short stories. All of the studies highlighted above dwelt on the perception of students on the study of literature.

However, a few studies have dwelt on students' perceptions of the incorporation of literature in the language classroom. A good example is Sukardi *et al.* (2021) who investigated "The Use of Literature in the Language Classroom at a Higher Education Institution in Indonesia". Their study aimed at exploring students' perceptions of the use of literature at higher education in Makassar, Indonesia. The study therefore revealed that literature could improve students' language awareness. Furthermore, Engku *et al.* (2020), embarked on a study to determine students' perceptions of the importance of the English literature component in selected secondary schools in Terengganu, Malaysia. The result of their study showed that the students had positive perceptions of the English literature component to a large extent. For the students, English literature enables them to develop their cultural awareness, and critical thinking skills, as well as improve their English grammar and vocabulary.

Again, Ruzbeh and Wan Roselezam (2014), examined the Significance of Literature in Foreign Language Teaching. Their research aimed at the consideration of literature as a significant tool for teaching fundamental language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Their study highlighted reasons for the use of literature in language classrooms and the major factors for choosing appropriate kinds of literary texts and the genres of literature in such classes

Nevertheless, there has been little attention to the students' perceptions of literature learning (Carroli, 2002; Naser & Aziz, 2017), especially, its incorporation in the teaching and learning of the English language. Therefore, this study focused on the perception of students to the incorporation of literature into the study of the English language in the polytechnics, especially, at the National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Light House Polytechnic, and Edo State polytechnic, Usen. In essence, students' responses are paramount in the teaching and learning process (Ahmad & Aziz, 2009; Carroli, 2002; Sidhu, 2003).

Methodology

This study was designed to investigate how students at the selected polytechnics in Edo State, perceive the use of literary materials in their English language learning. The

researchers hoped that the results of this study would encourage educators to predict that learning English was likely to proceed effectively with the deployment of literature as a teaching tool. The study deployed the use of a questionnaire, seeking responses to selected research questions. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 600 students of 2022/2023 ND one students of the National Institute of Construction Technology and Management (NICTM), Uromi, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Light House Polytechnic, Evbobanosa, and Edo State Polytechnic, Usen. The 600 respondents were selected by random sampling, out of the 1000 volunteers that constitute the study population.

The research adopted a five-item questionnaire as the instrument and technique, as shown in the research questions. The answers received, after the collation of the data, were changed into simple percentages in readiness for analysis and discussion of findings. The validity and reliability of the instruments used were in strict adherence to language and literature experts' guidance.

Results and Discussions

Table1: Showing Respondent's Indigenous Language

Language	Numbers of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Edo	300	50 %
Igbo	60	10%
Urhobo	60	10%
Ijaw	45	7.5 %
Itshekiri	30	5.0%
Yoruba	30	5.0%
Hausa	24	4.0%
Efik-Ibibio	24	4.0%
Igala	9	1.5%
Nupe	9	1.5%
Idoma	9	1.5 %
Total	600	100%

Table 1 shows that the three ethnic languages of Igbo, Urhobo, and Ijaw that share borders with Edo (the host ethnic language) have the second and third highest number of respondents. These are followed by respondents from Itshekiri and Yoruba ethnic languages with 5.0% apiece. The rest are those respondents belonging to the Hausa, Efik/Ibibio, Igala, Nupe, and Idoma with 4.0%, 4.0% 1.5%, 1.5%, and 1.5% respectively. It is important to note that the location of the polytechnics in Auchi, Evbobanosa, Uromi, and Usen in Edo State, accounts for a high percentage of 50% of the indigenous Edo-speaking respondents. Again, the proximity of the States of Anambra, Delta, Ondo, and Kogi in which the Igbo, Urhobo, Ijaw, Itshekiri, and Yoruba languages are spoken, to Edo accounts for the high number of respondents from non-Edo speakers. The conclusion here is that proximity plays a big role in students' choice of institutions for higher learning and the universality of English as lingua franca in Nigeria ensures equal learning opportunities.

Having looked at the number of respondents and the reasons for such, it becomes necessary to consider the genres of literature that the respondents prefer to study.

Table 2: Showing which genres of literature are most often preferred by students for study

Genres of literature	Number of respondents	Percentage of Responds
Prose	330	55%
Drama	216	36%
Poetry	54	9 %
Total	600	100%

Table 2 indicates that 55% of the respondents have a preference for prose over other genres of literature; 36% indicated a preference for drama, while the remaining 9% showed their preference for poetry. The interesting part of this result is the discovery that the majority of the respondents preferred prose despite its voluminous nature and time and energy consumption. This result is significant. It shows that English language learners prefer literary works that are written in a more straightforward language (novels) to the more ambiguous, flowery, Onate diction, and imagery of poetry.

Table 3: Respondents' Reasons for Preferring Prose

S/N	Reasons	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
1	Vocabulary building	150	45.45%
2	Syntax teaching	120	36.36%
3	It offers Variety	30	9.09%
4	Easy Reading	30	9.09%
		330	99.99%

From Table 3 above, it is apparent that the respondents who prefer prose on the grounds of building and improving their personal vocabulary, and syntax teaching topped the table with 45.45% and 36.36% respectively. Again, the other group of respondents who chose prose, because it offers them a variety and also makes for easy reading, are smaller in number and account for 9.09% and 9.09% respectively. It should be noted that all the reasons reveal the various kinds of motivations for the type of genre (prose) respondents easily go for, as an aid to their English language skill acquisition

Table 4: Respondents' Reasons for Preferring Drama

S/N	Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1	Improves dialogue	93	43.05
2	Aids quick reasoning	63	29.16
3	Teachers interjection	39	18.05
4	Teaches the use of short sentences	21	9.72
	Total	216	99.98

From Table 4 above, we see that respondents' preference for drama since it improves dialogue or conversational skills constitutes 43.05%. This is closely followed by those whose preferences are driven by their understanding that it aids quick reasoning, accounting for 29.16%. 18.05% and 9.72% of the respondents represent those whose reasons are that drama teaches interjection and the use of short sentences respectively.

The importance of the reasons given by respondents shows that drama enhances interpersonal communication skills (speaking and listening skills) with its automatic feedback system.

Table 5: Respondent's Reasons for Preferring Poetry

S/N	Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1	Improves mastery of the sound system	21	38.88
2	Enhances summarization skills	15	27.77
3	Teaches the use of adjectives for description	12	22.22
4	It is melodious	6	11.11
	Total	54	99.98

From Table 5 above, we see that 38.88% of the respondents showed their preference for poetry on the grounds that it improves their mastery of the English language sound system. This is followed by 27.77% of the respondents whose preference for poetry is as a result of its enhancement of their summarization/word economy skills. 22.22% of the respondents chose poetry because it teaches description through the appropriate use of adjectives, while 11.11% agreed that poetry is melodious. It is important to point out here that the teaching of phonetics/oral English is greatly enhanced by the incorporation of poetry as such elements as sound- assonance, alliteration, rhyme, etc. play significant roles. On the other hand, the study of poetry enhances one's ability to write precise/summary exercises while the knowledge gained from imagery, symbolism, andpictures can be applied to descriptive essay writing skills in the English language.

Table 6: Showing the Kind of Authors, Playwrights, and Poet Respondents Prefer Most

S/N	Brand of literature	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1	African-authored works set in Africa	237	39.5%
2	Foreign-authored works set in Africa	213	35.5%
3	Foreign-authored works with a foreign setting	105	17.5%
4	Onitsha market literature	45	7.5%
	Total	600	100

Table 6, above indicates that 39.5% of the respondents showed a preference for African-authored literary works set in Africa. 35.5% indicated their preference for foreign/non-African authored works that are set in Africa, while 17.5% and 7.5% of the respondents showed interest in foreign-authored works set outside Africa and Onitsha market literature respectively. It is pertinent to note from the table that the gap between the number of respondents who prefer African-authored works and those who chose foreign-authored works with local (African) settings is not very significant. This may be

attributable to the mimetic nature of the literature. Thus, members of any given society would always prefer to read issues that are familiar rather than alien ones.

For the 17.5% of respondents that chose foreign-authored works with foreign settings, it shows the natural tendency in man to explore unfamiliar events/terrain out of curiosity. The mind of man is adventurous. Finally, we see that the Onitsha Market Literature which about 7.5% of respondents chose, appeals mostly to the semi-literate audience. This could also be attributed to the fact that such texts are not recommended by the various regulatory bodies within the educational industry for Nigerian pupils and students. We see this problem as significant, because it still enjoys limited patronage among respondents perhaps, mostly because students concern themselves with text that aids them in passing examinations.

Factors that Impede Respondents' Learning of English Language Skills through Literature

Several factors have been identified as being responsible for the negative attitude students keep to the learning of the English language skills through literature texts in English. These factors range from psychological, logistical, etc. Below is a look at some of them.

1. Psychological factors
 - a. Most of the students/respondents admitted to having low self-concept in their ability to understand.
 - b. Most of the students/respondents admitted to having inherited the poor reading culture bedeviling Nigerian society.
 - c. The respondents admitted to having the wrong notion about literature as mere storytelling.
 - d. Some of the respondents admitted their inability to relate the lectures on literature to the acquisition of English language skills.
 - e. Others accepted that they had developed a phobia for the 'hard' language of poetry and related Shakespearean works.
2. Logistical factors
 - a. One of the logistic factors is the dearth of experts.
 - b. There is an apparent scarcity of quality books and other relevant teaching aids.
 - c. Most libraries are not properly equipped with literary works.
 - d. There is also the problem of the high cost of literacy books.
 - e. Time allocation to the teaching and learning of the English language (Use of English) is usually not enough. In the polytechnics studied, for instance, the use of English is taught as a two (2) unit course, 2 hours per week.
 - f. Some of the respondents indicated the stealing of books as a major problem.

The above factors (challenges) were spotted by over 95% of the sampled population of 600 respondents. It is interesting to note that these respondents were the only ones that returned the copies questionnaire and were at liberty to identify as many problems as possible covering areas such as psychological and logistics related.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study considered students' perception of the learning of the English language through literature in English. It used the 2021/2022 OND one students of the National

Institute of Construction Technology and Management (NICTM), Uromi, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Light House Polytechnic, and Edo State Polytechnic, Usen, all in Edo State, as a case study. The study was carried out, with the use of five-item questionnaire copies which were administered to 600 OND one students of the above-named institutions. Data were gathered from the students of the schools mentioned and their analyses established that students generally have a positive attitude towards the use of literature in English for their English language learning. The respondents preferred prose and drama to poetry in their learning endeavours. However, factors such as poor understanding of literature, inappropriate teaching techniques, and poor reading culture were identified by the students as part of their challenges for maximizing the method.

The findings in the study revealed the multi-lingual nature of Nigerian society as proved by the different language groups of the respondents. The findings also put a big question mark on the quality of teaching, teachers, instructional materials, and aid in the area of poetry. This is made prominent in the choice of prose over poetry, by the respondents. In order words, the poor quality of teaching and learning carried out in literature constitutes a setback in the learning of English language skills, such as the mastery of summarization skills, the phonetic sound system of the English language, and the power of imagination and description (See Table 5.).

Another important finding is that 39.5% and 35.5% of the respondents indicated their preference for African-authored works set in Africa, and foreign-authored works set in Africa (local setting), respectively. What this shows, is that the two groups of respondents prefer similar works (novels). Respondents preferred the literature that reflects their society.

It also emphasizes the definition of African literature which authentically reflects the African setting and themes irrespective of the origin of the author, playwright, or poet. This is made clear by the 17.5% of the respondents who chose non-African authors with works set outside Africa.

In conclusion, the quality of English language skills is improved greatly by constant exposure to diverse works of literature.

Consequently, the following recommendations are made:

1. Reading literature should be made compulsory at tertiary institutions especially, the polytechnics.
2. The changes in the quest for the acquisition of English language skills through the instrumentality of literacy works should form enough ground, for further research.
3. The standard of the English language teachers of Nigerian polytechnics should be improved.
4. Instructional materials needed for the improvement of the acquisition of English language skills through literature should be made available.

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